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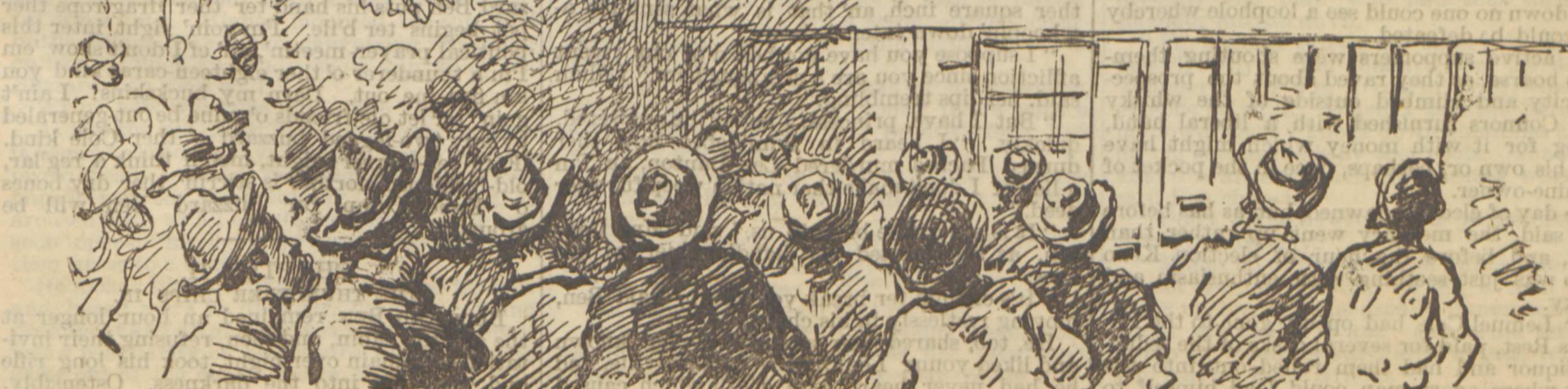
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No. 270.

BLIZZARD BEN, The Arizona Cyclone; or, The Riot at Keno Camp.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "YOUNG KENTUCK," ETC., ETC.



THERE, ON THE VERY EDGE OF THE ROOF, BLIZZARD BEN STOOD ERECT, HOLDING BOSS COLE HIGH ABOVE HIS HEAD.

Blizzard Ben,

THE ARIZONA CYCLONE;

OR,
THE RIOT AT KENO CAMP.

BY CAPT. MARK WILTON,
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CHAPTER I.

BLIZZARD BEN COMES TO TOWN.

KENO CAMP was enjoying the first holiday it had ever seen. Its existence had begun a year before, when the first gold-finders had erected a lean-to against a cliff, but from that time on it had waxed strong and populous, until it was reckoned one of the sturdiest infants near the Gila river.

Of course it did not yet presume to rival Phoenix, Bumblebee or Bigbug, but there was a good deal of expansive power in the town, and its people were unanimous in the opinion that it had a future ahead of it.

Up to the beginning of our story there had been no organized system for running the place or keeping the peace, but among the hundred and twenty-five men who were legal voters was many a man of the bad-citizen class, and the more peaceful of the inhabitants had awakened to the fact that sundry officers were needed to run the city on correct principles.

Out of this project grew the holiday already referred to, and not a pick had been lifted since the previous night. All Keno Camp regarded the occasion as a momentous one. In the first place, they were to elect a mayor who should rule over them for a year, unless divorced from his office by a bullet or some other dispensation of Providence; and, secondly, these bronzed men were to have a chance to exercise their freeman's right of casting a vote—something many of them had not done for years.

Such being the case, it is not strange that excitement ran high, going up to a simmering point as soon as the legal voters opened their eyes in the morning, and then boozing along until it was at fever-heat and still on the gain.

Much of this superfluous warmth was due to a certain cause which may here be explained.

The first man to suggest that a mayor be elected was the owner of the Lodestone mine, Lemuel Cole by name, and he it was who pushed the project by day and night. As a result, when the election being pretty sure to occur, some one remembered that a man must be selected from out the others to take the weight of honor on his manly shoulders, Dave Connors, the foreman of the Lodestone, had come to the front with jumping-jack agility.

"Who shall it be?" he repeated, looking around the group with a benevolent air. "The interrogatory is wal put, feller pards. More, ther question is timely. Let me, feller pards, hev ther honor o' suggestin' a name. I ax ye in all fa'rness, who is it that come ter Keno Camp when it was a weepin' babe an' raised it to a strong kid by his stout arm? Who owns ther most property hyer? Who employs ther most men? Who was the father o' this grand project?"

"Adam!" answered a voice from the crowd; but Dave disregarded it, knowing that he had the attention of the Keno citizens poised on a hair trigger.

"Only one name will fill all them blanks," he declared, "and that name is Lemuel Cole."

A momentary hush fell on the crowd, and then a score of men shouted in concert, giving a cheer for Cole. As might be expected, these men were employees at the Lodestone, but the ball had been set in motion, and when the sun went down no one could see a loophole whereby Cole could be defeated.

His active supporters were shouting themselves hoarse, as they raved about the prospective city and climbed outside of the whisky Dave Connors furnished with a liberal hand, paying for it with money which might have been his own or, perhaps, once in the pocket of the mine-owner.

The day of election dawned, but, as has before been said, the mercury went up rather than down, and before the hour of election Keno Camp was just seething with enthusiasm and whisky.

For Lemuel Cole had openly gone to the Pilgrim's Rest, paid for several casks of the seductive liquor and had them rolled out into the street where every man could load himself to the muzzle, if he saw fit.

And nearly every man did see fit, which fact accounts for the erratic curves and turns performed by the men of Keno, as they pressed the soil of the street under their big boots in an impromptu parade in honor of Mayor-elect Cole.

The voting was to begin at twelve o'clock, and at ten the mine-owner sat on the piazza of the Pilgrim's Rest and rubbed his hands with great satisfaction. Thus far, not a whisper had been heard against his candidacy; not one hostile voice had suggested an opposition candidate, and Lemuel rested under the belief that he was the most lucky man in Arizona.

As is usual in the West, the number of men in Keno Camp exceeded the female population by a large majority, for while over six score stalwart males handled the picks, slung liquid devastation and attended to smaller jobs, only seven women were known to exist in the embryo city.

Of these, two were colored charmers of such antique appearance, that they were counted in only when it was time to feed, so the actual number on deck was only five.

Near the western side of the town, two of these women lived in a cabin by themselves. Only a short time before they had had a male protector in the shape of a young man, who was the son of the elder woman, and the brother of the younger, but when Lee Danton was killed by the Apaches, Lillian and her mother were left alone.

They were not so very bad off in a pecuniary way, for Lee Danton's business energy had made him owner of the Saco mine, and when he went off the stage they kept the mine in motion after a fashion.

On the evening before the election day, a man entered Keno Camp on the western side and went straight to the Danton cabin. Had he been less absorbed in thought, he might have noticed the commotion around the Pilgrim's Rest, but he knocked at the door without a suspicion that anything unusual was afoot.

It was opened by Lillian, a very pretty girl of about twenty years, and her fair face brightened wonderfully at sight of the unexpected caller.

"Why, Ben, is it you?" she cried, putting out her hand.

"Wal, I reckon that's about the size on't," he answered, in a heavy voice. "Them sparklin' eyes o' yours don't deceive ye a bit—I'm Blizzard Ben, ther Gila Tornader. Put it thar, princess!"

He folded a hand which was like unto a blanket for size over the little one so frankly given him, and then, as Mrs. Danton came to the door, they led him in with every appearance of pleasure.

He stooped when he passed through the door, for he was a piece of human flesh that measured six feet and two inches in height, and when a chair was brought he lowered himself into it as though expecting to see it give way beneath him.

A sort of giant was this man who proclaimed himself the Gila Tornado, and enough muscle he seemed to have for several men of ordinary caliber; but, despite the fact that he had an aggressive-looking stock of hair and beard and a small arsenal of weapons in his belt, his face was that of a good-natured man.

He beamed kindly on mother and daughter, though there was a slight shadow on his broad face.

"This is a great surprise, Ben," said Lillian. "We supposed you still in Leadville."

"Men come an' go, you knaw," he answered, in his deep-voiced way, "an' you can't expect a human tornader ter stick to any one place. Leadville is played out—too many folks ther square inch, an' that is what sent me a whoopin' down inter Arizony."

"I suppose you have not heard of our recent affliction since you are a stranger here," Lillian said, her lips trembling.

"But I have, princess, I have," he answered, quickly. "I heard in Bumblebee how ther durned 'Paches murdered Lee Danton, an' I'm a liar ef I don't make ther nation weep fur ther dead."

"It is a terrible blow to us," said Mrs. Danton, as she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"It's enough ter break you all up," said Ben, moving restlessly in his chair.

He, too, shared their sorrow. He had known and liked young Lee Danton in Leadville, and he had never heard of a death which caused him more sorrow; but he would rather have

run the gantlet among Apaches than to sit there and see the two women shed tears.

Such a sight always demoralized him.

So he suddenly straightened his burly form and added with more briskness:

"I heerd he left a mine, so I s'pose you are in comfort'ble sarcumstances, mum?"

"We have done nicely so far, though we employ but ten men, but we are beginning to fear new trouble."

"Durnation! That's bad. What is ther racket?"

"We fear we shall lose our mine."

"Goin' ter play out?"

"No, for it is growing richer every day, but a man has appeared here who claims that he worked it before Lee began mining—in fact, before we came to Keno Camp; and on that ground he bases his claim to be the sole and legal owner of that which furnishes us means of support."

"It's a put-up job!" cried Blizzard Ben, "an' all played 'cause he thinks you two lone women who hain't got any man ter back you ag'in' ther cold deal."

"That is just my idea," said Lillian.

"But it won't work," added the giant, slapping his ponderous hand on his knee. "I'm hyer now, right up from Yuma, an' late from Leadville, an' I'll back ye ag'in' all ther rival claimants in Arizony; an' so will every honest miner in Keno Camp."

"So we have already been assured by several men, but I perceive a dark cloud arising on the horizon," said Lillian.

"What is it?"

"Among the people in Keno Camp is a man named Lemuel Cole, and he is by long odds the richest man here. From the time we first struck the town, he has professed admiration and love for me, but I always disliked and feared him, and twice I have declined his offer of marriage."

"Perfectly proper," Ben commented. "Never marry a p'ison snake ef you hev ter be an old b'ach like me."

"When Caspo Latham put in his claim for our mine, Cole came to me and said that if I would marry him he would see me safely through. I refused, and he went away in great anger."

"Let him b'ile!"

"Wait. To-morrow, Keno Camp is to elect a mayor, and that person will be one whose word is law here. He will not only be mayor but judge, jury and sheriff, and before him will go all questions of law. There is but one candidate and that is Lemuel Cole. To-morrow, at this hour, he will be mayor of Keno Camp, and when the question of who owns the mine comes before him he will decide in favor of our enemy unless I give way to his wishes."

For several moments after she finished, Blizzard Ben sat staring at her mutely, lost in wonder at what he considered her astuteness in foreseeing the future.

"By ther eternal!" he then cried, "this thing must be stopped."

"How can it be done?"

"This Cole must not be elected."

"It can not be prevented. He has played his cards well, and in all the city there is not a dissenting voice."

"No opposition at all?"

"Not the slightest."

"But thar must be!" the giant forcibly declared. "I ain't goin' ter hev you persecuted, an' sech a man as he ain't fit ter rule a convention o' coyotes. I'm an alien hyer in Arizony, but, hang me ef I don't chip in in this election."

"It will do no good and will expose you to danger. Cole is the idol of the town just at present, and what good can a stranger do in trying to stem the tide?"

"Some men c'u'd do nothin', but when Blizzard Ben puts his hand ter ther drag-rope ther pot begins ter b'ile. I'm goin' right inter this political prayer-meetin', an' ef I don't show 'em I'm a thunderer o' ther eighteen-carat kind you kin fire me out. Darn my buckskins! I ain't goin' ter let ole friends o' mine be out-generated by any two-legged buzzard o' ther Cole kind. 'Fore ter-morrer night, men'll think a reg'lar, old-fashioned norther is stirrin' ther dry bones o' Keno Camp, fur Blizzard Ben will be around!"

CHAPTER II.

THE THUNDERER CHIPS IN.

BLIZZARD BEN remained an hour longer at the Danton cabin, and then, refusing their invitation to remain over night, took his long rifle and went out into the darkness. Ostensibly, his object was to size the town and its people,

but the real reason lay in the fact that, though he had confidently declared he would produce a reaction against Lemuel Cole, he had not as yet the remotest idea how the work was to be accomplished, and he wanted to be alone where he could think.

He was a peculiar man, with some faults but an amount of kindness, good-humor and honesty which made amends for a good deal.

Twenty years of rough life on the border and in the mines had made him equally rough in his ways and his exterior, and when he grappled with a whisky bottle he usually went way up and made himself a terror, if not a nuisance; but the rareness of such sprees on his part took off a little of the curse.

For the Dantons, whom he had met and often visited in Leadville, he had a deep regard, and now he was resolved to in some way rescue them from the grip of Lemuel Cole.

He went over to the Pilgrim's Rest and sized the crowd as he had intended, but he found it like a river—the water all went one way and every lubber had the flag of Cole nailed at his mast-head.

Ben did not mix with them at all, for he wanted a chance to think before striking, and he soon drew to one side.

"I've sighted one o' their toughest bosses I ever see'd," he muttered, "but I'll saddle him ef I get every rib bu'sted afore the circus ends. Yas, I'm goin' ter block this game. I am. Yes. But how?"

Blizzard Ben grew vague and erratic in his remarks, and he shook his shaggy head angrily as his brain failed to give him a good idea.

"Durn my buckskins! what kin I do? It won't do ter fail, fur I'm ther man they called ther wu'st whirlwind that ever devastated Colorado. I have it: I'll buy a jug of whisky, an' as ther juice goes inter my throat ther idee will come out. That's my best holt."

He was not long in acting on the idea; so, going to a second-class saloon, he purchased two quarts of whisky, paid his bill in glittering gold and then tramped away down a dark gulch for half a mile.

Then, reaching a niche, he sat down and uncorked the jug.

"I'll have it out hyer. None o' them coyotes 'll think o' comin' hyer when they are so howlin' happy, an' I'll sip ther nectar till I git ther idee."

He raised the jug to his mouth and indulged liberally, after which he sat for a long time looking straight into the darkness, except when he discarded plan after plan with an angry shake of his head.

"I must have another nip. My idees will soon begin ter b'ile, an' when they git ter roarin' ther ways an' means will be circlin' round me thicker'n vultures round a wounded buffler."

He drank, not only once more, but repeatedly, until even his hard head began to feel the effect, and a weak-kneed, chuckling, thoroughly-intoxicated man sat crouching in the shadow of the cliff as a substitute for bold Blizzard Ben.

"Aha! I have the idee!" he said, with a foolish laugh. "I'll go ter camp ter morrer an' run ug'in' Cole myself! O' course I'll be elected, an' then I'll bev ther new claimant flogged at the stake an' give ther hull town to Lillian. Whoopie! them's my idees!"

Determined to act on this idea at once, he staggered to his feet and started, but he had taken but one step when he toppled over and lay sprawling on the sand like a big turtle.

He made no second attempt to arise, but, liking his bed quite well, settled down and contentedly fell asleep.

Hours passed; the night wore on and passed, day dawned and the sun crept up the sky; but still the Arizona Thunderer kept his place and slept unconscious of all things and neglectful of his duty. Higher mounted the sun, and in the village the election canvassing was going on like a Punch-and-Judy show run wild, but Blizzard Ben slept well.

Where now was hope for Lillian Danton?

At last the sun mounted high enough so that it began to shed its rays into the canyon and a broad beam touched the sleeper's face. Perhaps it was the light, shining in his eyes, that aroused him; at all events, he began to stir and soon opened his eyes, yawned, stretched and then arose to a sitting position.

He looked like a broken-up man, for his hair and beard were in disorder, his eyes red and prominent and his garments sand-speckled, but it was a peculiarity of his nature that he always came out of his debauches in the best of condition.

"Durn my boots: ef I ain't be'n drunk ag'in!"

he feebly muttered, a flush of shame actually appearing in his bronzed cheeks. "Blizzard Ben, you are no prairie tempest but a blasted old fool. I know that much straight, but I'll be shot ef I know whar you be, or even the state you encumber with your miser'ble carcass!"

He was telling the truth, but a little reflection brought all back to him. He remembered his coming to Keno Camp, the interview with the Dantons, his promise and the idiotic beginning of an attempt to carry it out.

"Etarnal mischief!" he groaned, looking at the sun, "it are past nine o'clock now or I'm a mule. Thar ain't no time a tall fur an elaborate plot. Oh! go an' sell your head fur a football, Blizzard Ben, fur you're ther biggest fool in Arizony."

He staggered to his feet and once more glared at the sun.

"Cuss my carcass! I'm afeard thar ain't no hope at all, but I'm jest goin' inter that town on a rampage. I'll make 'em think a baby elephant has got on his ear afore noon, an' ef anybody treads on ther trunk o' ther Arizony Thunderer there'll be a pocketful o' business fur ther morgue."

He caught up his long rifle and, without losing more time, started at a run for Keno Camp. Every sign of weakness seemed to have vanished and, to follow out his own unique comparison, he looked like a "rogue" elephant on the war-path.

As he emerged from the canyon he heard the howling from the town, and in the distance saw a group of men who seemed to be listening to a stump-speech from some orator, but he kept on without breaking until near the crowd. Then he subsided to a walk, for he would attract too much attention if he went under the wire at a 2:10 gait.

By that time he had gained a view of the man who was declaiming from the empty barrel, and he saw a well-known face.

"Dave Connors, by ther Etarnal!" he muttered. "Wonder whose trumpet he is blowin'. Ef he counts in with ther Cole caucus, which seems likely, he'll probly buck ag'in' a tornader on stilts afore long. When he sights me you'll hear him squal."

Having reached the crowd, Ben mingled quietly with the outskirts thereof, listening to the orator, but at the same time watching the men about him.

Dave Connors, otherwise called Lodestone Dave, was making his greatest effort. Boss Cole had rolled out his barrel, politically and literally, and his right-hand man was playing brass band for the occasion. He certainly made noise enough, and if the praises he chanted lacked melody they were stalwart and loyal to Cole from the word go.

Still, not all the men were entranced by his eloquence, and near Blizzard Ben a gray-bearded old veteran was entertaining a half-dozen friends by a recital of his own experience.

"You bet it are a glorious emergency," he was saying, an' it does me proud ter anticipate in sech. This hyer city, pards, is ther twenty-seventh I've helped ter christen sence I struck ther West. I see'd Deadwood an' Leadville nail ther banner o' freedom ter their mast-heads, an' yer kin tell what healthy towns they be now. I've b'en humpin' round ther West 'bout as long as any on 'em. It is forty year ago sence I went ter Texas, which was then jest kickin' over ther Mexican traces and gulpin' in ther breath o' liberty, an' in 1845-6, I followed John C. Fremont in his big march across ther wild plains. Yes, sirree, I struck Californy in '46, three year afore ther great rush, an' ef you want any p'ints on ther West, I'm ther man ter explain."

Blizzard Ben had listened and watched closely, and he sized the speaker as a man of mettle. No braggart was he, but a strong-armed, clear-headed old veteran who could fight as well as he could talk.

"Who is he?" he had asked of a bystander, and the latter, a slender young fellow with a supple, athletic figure and bronzed face, had curiously answered:

"Why, don't you know? That is Buck Arnold, the hero of two wars and a hundred Indian fights."

"Hey we sech a ve'ran in our midst?" Blizzard Ben asked, in seeming surprise.

"That's the bigness o' it."

"Kin Boss Cole equal that record?"

"Can he?" repeated the young man, contemptuously. "Well, I guess not. He can't stand on a hill and look at the par-rate in anything except deviltry."

"Why, I thort as how he was a saint."

"So all these fools think. He's got dust and he runs a big mine. That's enough for them, curse their thick heads."

The young man was working himself into a sort of subdued fever, but Blizzard Ben was listening coolly, though very eagerly. He saw a glimmer of light.

"You don't like Boss Cole?"

"No more than I like the devil."

"Will you vote for him?"

The question seemed to sting the younger man into a fury. He caught Ben by the arm and almost hissed his reply:

"Will I vote for him? Old man, I don't know you from Adam, but I don't mind telling you I came to Keno Camp to shoot Boss Cole. That's what he did to my brother, up in Leadville, shot him in the back, too; and I've come all the way from Sante Barbara to get revenge. I struck at the wrong time, for my man is the idol of the outfit, but I'll bore him yet, if he is ten times the mayor of Keno Camp."

Down on his shoulder came the miner's brawny hand.

"Pard, put it thar!" he exclaimed. "You an' me are on ther same tack, an' ef we go in ter win, Boss Cole need never be mayor hyar. Be you at my back?"

"To the death," said the other, catching the breeze.

"What's your name?"

"Earl Chester."

"An' I am Blizzard Ben, ther Arizony Thunderer. I'm a roarin' whirlwind, an' when I travel I go by telephone. You kin hear me. I'm full o' sand, fur I tar it up when I breathe hard, an' when I snore at night I play bass-ball with quartz rocks. I jest lifts them. I'm way-up as a pard ter tie to, an' ef you say ther word we'll make Keno Camp think ther 'arth is breakin' up."

"Slide right in on your racket, old man; I'm at your heel with my sixes," Chester declared.

CHAPTER III.

LODESTONE DAVE BUCKS AGAINST A CYCLONE.

THE Arizona Thunderer turned to where Buck Arnold was still giving the crowd items from his past experience. Ben had already made one convert, but he knew they were set up in an alley with all Keno Camp against them, and there was yet a good deal of work to do.

They were just then but mere specks on the surface, and Buck Arnold, with all his recollections of '45, was no more. The one bright star in the sky was Dave Connors, alias Lodestone Dave.

He was pouring out a torrent of eloquence which was sweeping and comprehensive. Beginning with the creation of Adam and Eve, he had traced the history of man down to the days of Noah, when Buck Arnold was taking his friends across the southern plains "with John C. Fremont, pards," and above Connors, as he declaimed from the barrel-head, Mayor-elect Cole looked down from the piazza of the Pilgrim's Rest and smiled to see all going so well.

The veteran of '45 brought his listeners into California with a flourish, metaphorically speaking, and then a broad and heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Durn my mule team!" exclaimed a rough voice, "you are too modest a man by half, Buck Arnold. Whar is ther male biped that kin show ther record you kin? Not in Keno Camp. Wal, I guess not. Durn your hide, Buck, why be you lyin' back so when men want a mayor? Why, yod big-eared old tramp, you, it's sech men as you we want ter rule over this city, not a man who ain't got no record only what he buys."

"That's so," boldly added Earl Chester, but no one else echoed his sentiment.

"Who in blazes be you?" Arnold asked, addressing the man who had thus turned his shoulder into an anvil.

"I'm a timid critter an' skeery in a crowd, but I'll tell ye. I'm Blizzard Ben, the Arizony Thunderer; an' I'm a roarin' whirlwind an' a cyclone on stilts. When I breathe hard from my lower chest I knock down chimblies an' tear up big cottonwoods by ther roots. That's ther kind o' a kitten you'll find around when Blizzard Ben chips in."

"Don't know as ever see'd ye before," said Arnold, dubiously.

"Makes no difference; don't apologize. Like es not you never did. When a man sees a black norther once he usually remembers it, an' that's the caliber I am. I've come ter Keno Camp an' mean ter stay, an' I'm goin' ter make you mayor, Buck Arnold."

"That is sound talk," cried Earl Chester.

"Arnold just fills the bill, pards. We want

one of our own number, one of experience, and where can you beat Buck Arnold."

"Hold up, right thar!" interrupted the man of '45, with an amused smile. "When I git ready ter wrastle Boss Cole I'll let you know."

"Can't we vote for whom we choose?" Chester demanded.

"Wal, I guess we can an' will," declared Blizzard Ben. "I'm a naturalized citizen, I am, an' took out my papers when I was cuttin' my teeth. I claim ther privilege o' votin' early an' often, an' I say, furdermore, that justice ain't be'n did hyer. Ther caucus that nominated Boss Cole was a packed convention an' I claim ther divine right o' boltin'. Are we goin' ter let any man say how we shall cast our vote just because our P. O. address is in Arizony?"

"No, by thunder!" declared a new voice. "I'm Tom Heenan, an' I vote fur ther best man. I crow loud fur Buck Arnold."

Blizzard Ben and Earl Chester echoed the cry and quite a ripple was created for their candidate. He had many friends who declared their intention of giving him a complimentary vote, and it looked as though he might get a pretty fair send-off considering he was an independent.

The Thunderer, however, knew he would fall far behind Cole unless something was done to create a stir. These men must be put on their mettle or else five-sixths of the Keno citizens would stand up to be counted on the wrong side.

Accordingly, he began to glance reflectively at Lodestone Dave, and finally spoke to Earl.

"I'm goin' ter stir up ther British lion," he said. "That howlin' dervish hates me as ther devil does holy water, an' he has only to ketch sight o' me an' his hair will stand on end. Let me alone while I kerry ther helm about right, but ef ther boarders get ter tarin' over my quarter-deck, I'd esteem et a favor ef you 'n Heenan would ship in."

"Bet your life we will," said Chester.

"Then hyer goes."

With these words the Thunderer pushed through the crowd toward where the untiring Lodestone Dave was still driving his four-in-hand of eloquence, being at that precise moment touching on the history of Cleopatra's Needle and a few other antiquities.

His throne was a peculiar one. Two barrels had been set on end, one on top the other, so that Connors was well above those about him. Down on the ground, at one side, another Cole delegate stood ready to feed all of the sheep who were faithful and thirsty.

Thirsty, Blizzard Ben certainly was after his spree, yet he did not expect to taste the whisky. If Dave Connors sighted him there would probably be an immediate row.

Luckily for the Thunderer, Dave's gaze was in another direction, and the last drop of the cupful given him had gone down his craving throat before the discovery came.

Then the orator stopped short in his remarks and stood glaring down at the man from Leadville.

"Fill up, my friend, fill her up again," gently said Ben to the whisky guardian, "fur I'm so dry that a blow under ther ribs would make me spurt blood two hundred feet high."

The tin cup was filled, but just then Lodestone Dave came down off the barrel with a crash.

"Hold up, Blizzard Ben!" he shouted, hotly. "You can't drink any whisky from that barrel."

"Durn your mules! who wants ter drink from ther barrel?" cried the Thunderer. "This cup is good enough fur me. I ain't proud."

"Put down the cup or I'll bore you!" said Connors, dropping his hand on his revolver.

"That's nothing new. You've ben borin' ther hull crowd fur an hour."

With a curse the mine overseer jerked his revolver from his belt and covered the human cyclone.

"For ther last time, drop that cup or you're checked through ter our graveyard!" he thundered.

"I cave, David, I cave," said the cyclone, meekly. "I never kick ag'in' ther pricks. Down goes ther cup, as yer say, but it seems a leetle hard that I can't feast with ther rest. Wuss than all ther rest, I've had ther name of being a bad man in ther past. Yes, sirree, I'm a graduate o' a bad man's school, an' that's my diploma!"

While speaking he had slowly lowered the cup, but at the last word his hand came up quickly and the dose of whisky was dashed full in the face of Lodestone Dave.

Now, though the overseer of the Cole mine

had shaken hands with many a drink of whisky, he was a trifle particular in regard to the manner of taking it; and as the stuff went into his face and eyes he reeled back against the barrels with a select essay in profanity.

One hand he brushed across his eyes, and then the other again raised his revolver. He could dimly see his hated enemy, and he pulled the trigger promptly.

The slug hit the air plumb center, and that was all. The Leadville man had ducked his head and saved his brains.

"So you play bullets fur trumps!" he then said. "Good, old man, I'm with yer. I'm Blizzard Ben, ther Thunderer, an' that's my keerd!"

Out from his belt he had drawn a huge knife, and at the finish he hurled it straight ahead. His mark was not Dave Connors, but the hat above his head, and the knife passed through the crown and pinned the sombrero fast to the upper barrel.

"Whoopee!" continued the Leadville man, "I'm ther crack knife-tosser o' Arizony an' I kin brush a tear from a musketo's eye an' never touch ther iris."

Connors had seen the knife coming, and, believing it meant for his own carcass, had tried to dodge, but he was only soon enough to squirm from under his hat as it was pinned to the barrel; and then he swore again as he marked the skill of the Thunderer.

Whipping out his own knife, he sprung toward Ben with a snarl, but the latter did not waver. Into his broad palm fell the knife-hand of the overseer, and in an instant more he lifted the fellow bodily, swung him back and then forward, shooting him from his hands and against the upper barrel with a force that knocked it to the ground.

In the natural course of events, Connors followed in the same course, struck the side of the barrel, quivered for a moment and then settled down, shoulders first, between the two barrels, where he lay doubled up, swearing and squirming, his legs beating the air like drumsticks.

There was a momentary pause in hostilities, while the overseer's friends were extricating him from his unpleasant position, but the pause was not one of silence. A jeering laugh at Lodestone Dave's expense was running through the crowd, one started by Earl Chester, and even the man who had traveled with John C. Fremont indulged in a smile.

Connors, however, came out of his box in pretty fair condition. A few scratches on his face might have made a stranger think him a henpecked husband just out after a skirmish with his wife; but his face had a very business-like look as he turned to Blizzard Ben, nor was he made less angry by the sight of that individual coolly tossing off another cup of the seductive whisky.

"I'll hev your life fur that!" howled David.

"Wade right in, old man. I'm at home an' lookin' at yer. It ought ter swell yer up with pride ter be took such notice of, David, fur it ain't every day Blizzard Ben is in town. Yes, gents, that's my handle, Blizzard Ben, ther Thunderer, an' I'm ther only bad man in ther West that kin show a diploma. Oh! I'm wicked all through ther week an' way inter ther fortnight."

The miner ran his thumbs into his ears and with his hands beating the air like fans beamed genially upon his foe.

"Oh! dry up, will yer?" said Connors. "You've got ter fight me afore we go further, Ben What's-your-name."

"I'm all ready; wade in."

"Choose your wepons."

"Knives," said Ben, tersely.

"Get ready then, and waste no more time."

All this preliminary skirmishing had interested the men of Keno, but it was so common an occurrence for whisky-crazed men to get on a spree in the infant city and make a row that no one thought of getting unduly excited.

Even the prospective duel would be no more than they had seen before, and though they willingly fell back to make a ring and give fair play, it was done systematically and the nonchalance of the spectators was shown when they began to invite each other to make bets on the result.

No one, however, seemed anxious to bet against Blizzard Ben.

CHAPTER IV.

BLIZZARD BEN STORMS THE RANCH.

Up on the piazza of the Pilgrim's Rest was one man who looked down on the scene in silence but with an anxious face, for matters were not progressing to his liking.

This man was Lemuel Cole, he whom the straight-out Keno citizens proposed to make mayor on the run. He had been as contented a pilgrim as ever came to Keno Camp before Blizzard Ben chipped in, but it stirred his soul to the edge to see a stranger handle loyal Dave Connors so roughly.

Lemuel was not cast on the same pattern as the rough-and-ready men who followed his lead, but smooth-faced and slender of build, elaborately-dressed and well finished, withal, he would have done for a parson, so far as external went. His shining boots, broadcloth garments, white shirt and oiled hair seemed rather out of place in Keno Camp; but Boss Cole was rich and could afford to do as he saw fit.

He had always been a sharp business man when looking out for himself. The Lodestone mine was well managed, and when he caught the mayor fever he pushed his interest with a dash.

Dave Connors had been properly primed for the work, the proverbial barrel had been freely rolled out, and not a cloud had appeared on the horizon up to the time when Blizzard Ben came to town.

Boss Cole, as has been said, perceived the antics of the bad man with the diploma in sorrow and anger, but not for one moment did he suspect that it was all a deliberate scheme to prevent him from ruling over Keno Camp as he hoped to do. Ben, though a stranger to him, was some honest miner of the town who had taken so much enthusiasm in a liquid form that he was a little off-color; but it made Cole mad that poor Dave should suffer thereby, and he slyly drew his revolver and resolved to take a hand in the game if David came to grief.

Blizzard Ben had made many friends since his arrival. The miners had never liked Connors, and Ben seemed like "one of their kind," a man who could give and take, and his dash and conceit of speech were rather captivating, since his boasts were always accompanied by good-humor.

Earl Chester, too, had been working the claim for all it was worth, and the men began to ask each other why Buck Arnold would not make as good a mayor as Boss Cole. A man who had crossed mountains of eternal snow with John C. Fremont, ought in some way to be remembered by his grateful country, and Buck was certainly as honest as they made them.

Blizzard Ben and Connors stripped for the battle, but the Lodestone men looked grave when they saw them together. The overseer was a muscular man, and known to be a hard customer in a fight, but the stranger towered far above him, a perfect giant in height, and of such tremendous breadth of shoulder and circumference of arm that he looked capable of tearing down the Pilgrim's Rest, *a la Samson*.

"Are you all ready, gents?" asked Earl Chester, who was one of the seconds.

"All ready," said Connors tersely.

"S'posen we drink all around first," suggested Ben.

"No," shouted Dave, "this matter is goin' ter be settled right away. You an' me hev see'd each other afore an' it ain't our first set-to. Now, we're goin' ter eend ther whole business. Only one of us needs ter drink; let him do that limeby, while they are plantin' his victim."

"Go slow, there," warned Earl Chester. "It's bad enough for you to pick on a stranger the moment he enters the town without bragging of it. Pards, ain't Keno Camp free to all?"

"You bet," said several voices, in concert.

"Then Dave Connors ain't needed to play the bully."

"He ain't needed nohow!"

Lodestone Dave flashed an ominous glance toward the last speaker, but, unable to distinguish him in the crowd, turned back toward Earl.

"I'll see you when I'm done with this overgrown cuss," he suggestively said. "All these kickers will hear from me then."

"Yer don't want ter tackle the boy, fur he is bad," said Ben, who was coolly picking his teeth during the delay. "He is a dry-land whale, an' ef you hit him with a harpoon he'll spout forty barrels o' blood an' never droop a fluke."

Some one in the crowd impatiently began a cry of "Time, time!" and the duelists took the hint and again faced each other. Their knives crossed with a clash, and Boss Cole looked anxiously down from the piazza to see how the battle was going.

There is nothing childish about a duel with bowie-knives. Men may fight with revolvers and not get a mark, with fists and carry away only a black eye, with swords, and, even if rule

through the heart, have no disfiguring gashes; but a bowie carves up its victim in a terribly thorough though unscientific way, and lucky is the man who comes out of such a combat without being in condition for packing.

Cole wished to speak and encourage his overseer, but he saw that the stranger had some friends back of him and it would not do.

Foot to foot and knife to knife, the men were fighting. Neither of them looked upon the affair as boy's play, nor did they seem inclined to push matters. The knives clashed in regular order, but as the bystanders saw that no real thrusts were made they understood that each duelist was willing the other should force the fighting.

Finally, the crowd began to murmur. It was a very tame fight, considering the spicy prologue, and Blizzard Ben aroused to the emergency.

"I'm erbout ter come fur you, David," he announced. "Pigs rank high in ther Cincinnati market now an' you seem ready fur packing. Down goes your pen. I'm Blizzard Ben an' I'm a cyclone on stilts. Hear me whistle, will ye? When I breathe hard from my lower chest I make space double up with ther colic an' mountains belch out fire and red-hot gravy. Whoop!"

At the last word the Thunderer began in dead earnest. His knife moved in rapid circles, flashing a wall of steel before Dave, and making Boss Cole tremble anew. Then, too, the big foot of the Leadville man began to creep insidiously forward until, all of a sudden, the crowd perceived that he was compelling Conors to give ground.

The latter began to look anxious. He had challenged Ben when in an unreasoning fury, but now that he realized the kind of a bull he had seized by the horns he was anxious to let go.

"It's a purty fight," said Buck Arnold, "an' ther Thunderer, es he calls hisself, is almost ekul to a man we had when I crossed ther Sierras with John C. Fremont."

"That's the kind of men who will vote to make you mayor," said Earl Chester, over-hearing the remark.

"Lord, I ain't fit fur ther office," Buck protested.

"You can double discount Boss Cole on that score. Now, don't be bashful, but let us run you in. Put yourself in the hands of your friends and see the result."

"To obledge you an' Blizzard Ben, I will."

"Ha! look thar!"

No wonder one miner thus shouted, for, suddenly, Ben swept his adversary back, knocked his knife into mid-air, and then seemed in a fair way to finish the contest by one stroke. So thought Lodestone Dave, and, losing all heart, he turned to make headlong flight, but at that instant a revolver cracked and one-half of Ben's knife flew viciously through the air.

The slug had broken the blade short off at the handle.

One moment the Thunderer stared at the useless thing, and then his fierce gaze swept the crowd.

"Whar's ther durned galoot that broke my carving-knife?" he sputtered. "Let him apologize or I'll bore him."

He ceased suddenly, as his gaze wandered up to the piazza, for there he saw Lemuel Cole standing with a revolver in his hand, the muzzle not yet fully lowered.

"Durn your mule-team!" cried Blizzard Ben, "you're ther rooster that decapitated my cimeter. I shall have to smelt you fur that, an' when I git on a t'ar, I make Rome weep like a waterspout."

"Arrest that man!" said Cole, unheeding the threat. "All was quiet here until he came, but he is cre ting a row on our best day. Don't let our infant city be baptized in blood, but arrest the ruffian at once."

"So you call me a ruffian? Durn your hide, you've got your saddle on the wrong back. I explain your mistake, but that don't settle fur ther shot you fired at me. This will!"

At the last words, up came the Thunderer's revolver, hurriedly handed him by Earl Chester, but Cole wisely ducked his head and dashed inside the door.

His enemy, however, was not so easily baffled. He had a good excuse for carrying the war into the enemy's camp, and before he let up he intended to make Boss Cole show the white feather.

Accordingly, he went flying up the hotel steps, knocking over one man who recklessly tried to stop him; and then he, too, disappeared in the building.

Matters were marching a little more rapidly

than Earl Chester bargained for, but it was not in his heart to let his new pard brave danger alone or to himself lose a chance at Cole, so he made an attempt to follow him.

At the door, however, he paused as a rifle muzzle was thrust almost into his face, while the fat man who held the shining Remington hoarsely cried:

"Keep off my grass. The fust man that stirs gets cold lead fur dinner!"

"It's ther landlord," said Buck Arnold, in Earl's ear; then, turning to the rifleman: "Hold up, old man; d'ye think we are road-agents? Ef you don't want a row inside, let us go and rescue them Kilkenny cats from each other."

"Devil a stir! I've got two disturbers inside now an' that is all I want."

Then he thrust forward the rifle-barrel, obliging Earl to leap backward to save his nose, and before they could again advance he had darted inside and closed and barred the door.

Meanwhile, Blizzard Ben had gone bravely on his errand of storming the ranch. He knew nothing of the the interior, but on entering the door saw a flight of stairs beyond, and went up at a canter.

Once at the top he was in total darkness, but he turned to the left, which would be likely to bring him out on the piazza, if it brought him anywhere, and for a short distance he found firm footing beneath him.

In the midst of his success he came to grief; something caught him across the ankles and he went to the floor with a resounding crash. What it was he shrewdly suspected, but before he could arise, he was seized by the shoulders and, despite his two hundred odd pounds of flesh, dragged to one side with a rush.

That he was in the hands of Cole, he did not for a moment doubt, but when he felt for his belt he remembered that it lay on the ground outside, that his knife was broken and that his sole weapon, the revolver, had escaped his hold when he went down over the obstruction.

According to appearances, the Thunderer did not seem likely to capture the fort.

CHAPTER V.

BOSS COLE COMES TO GRIEF.

BLIZZARD BEN did not for one moment think of tame surrender; he feared no one man in Keno Camp, and if he was beaten down by the force of numbers it must be after a hard struggle.

He arose from the floor like a tiger from his lair, but at that moment a voice hissed in his ear:

"Be easy, man, be easy. I am no foe of yours, but I would save you from those who are. Take my hand and see if it feels like that of an enemy."

A small but muscular hand closed around the Thunderer's own, but the latter replied:

"Durn my mules, ef I understand the science o' feeling, an' I couldn't tell yer face from a Chinee's in this dark; but ef you are my friend, tell me whar is Lem Cole."

"Speak low. He is not far from us; he stretched a rope across the hall to trip you, and two men were with him to fight against you, but they were slow in their work and I pulled you out as you saw."

"An' who be you?"

"Shirley is my name, and I am no friend of Cole. Ha! do you hear them?"

The two men were standing in total darkness, but as Blizzard Ben listened he could hear voices not far away.

"Is that Cole's crowd?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then I'm goin' ter wade inter them."

"Go right in, Benjamin, and I'll back you for all I'm worth. Now charge!"

They crept along the hall for a few yards and then, when so rear the others that discovery could not long be averted, made a dash and went at them like battering-rams.

The Thunderer seized a man with his naked hands, swung him above his head and then cast him bodily to one side, the effort being as nothing for his hardened muscles; but the result was a little different from what he suspected.

With a crash the fellow struck and then a faint light streamed into the hall. Ben had flung his novel missile against a door and burst it open.

The light thus given showed the Thunderer's ally, a slenderly built man of middle age, kneeling on the stomach of a prostrate rough, and also revealed Boss Cole not far away, an anxious look on his smooth face, for matters were not going to his liking.

One look he took at the scene; then, wheeling suddenly, he darted through the open door.

A roar followed him as Ben started in pursuit, and when, after hurriedly catching a revolver and knife from the man he had used as a door-demolisher, the Thunderer sprung into the next room he saw his prey in full flight.

The Pilgrim's Rest was a spacious building for the region wherein it had taken root, being of two stories and a hundred feet long, so that there was ample room for a foot-race if our two acquaintances saw fit to indulge in a go-as-you-please.

Lemuel Cole, with all of his commanding, domineering ways and skill at plotting, was not a sufficiently brave man to look up on a person like his pursuer without actual terror, and he ran in an unreasoning panic which soon took him into trouble. Blizzard Ben realized this when he saw the mine-owner suddenly pause and perceived that if he went on he must ascend another flight of stairs.

This stairway, since they were already on the upper floor, would of course take them to the roof, and Boss Cole did not seem to have a towering ambition to frolic on the steep incline, but in a choice between two evils he took the least and went on after a momentary pause.

He was at the very top when a grizzly-like growl sounded in his ears and the miner's heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Hold up, you durned galoot!" cried the Thunderer. "You're my mutton all ther way through an' I'm goin' ter cook ye."

"Draw back, or I'll shoot," said Cole, savagely, dropping his hand on his revolver but fearing to draw it.

"Ha! ha! That's a'most too good. What? you shoot a man? You drawr blood on ther Arizony Thunderer? Don't yer try it, you taller-plastered critter. Ef yer do, I'll mop ther floor with yer. D'ye hear! I say it, an' I'm ther wickedest man in Arizony. I'm ther only bad man in ther West that kin show a diploma. I drink a pint o' blood with every meal I eat!"

If the playful cyclone had whispered more gently in Boss Cole's ear he might have gained an easy victory; but his stentorian voice and flaming face frightened the would-be mayor out of his wits and he tremblingly drew the revolver.

He might as well have tried to take a flash o' lightning on the wing. One upward dash of Ben's paw sent the weapon rattling to the foot of the stairs, and then the long arms closed around him and he was in a vise-like grip.

The Thunderer flashed a glance upward and saw that just above them was a trap-door, and a wild idea occurred to him.

"Durn your mule team!" he said, savagely, "I'll show you ter your constituents an' let 'em see ther proper way o' elevatin' you."

Still holding fast to his prisoner, the giant burst open the trap-door and thrust him through. Cole began to beg for mercy in a most abject manner, for he believed that sure death awaited him, but Ben merely laughed.

He drew his own heavy body through the trap, and then both were on the roof, which certainly seemed too steep for a man to maintain his footing.

"Oh! have mercy!" implored Cole. "I'm not fit to die, and if you will let me alone I'll give you a thousand dollars."

"Don't try ter bribe ther opposition. You can't carry ther districts that way. Ther bolters are above corruption."

The giant raised his prisoner high above his head and then ran down to the roof's edge as lightly as though he was drawing a salary as a circus expert. On the ground below the men of Keno were surging forward toward the door and it was evident that Earl Chester and his friends had not yet succeeded in gaining admission.

A shout from above startled them, and they looked up to see a strange sight. There, on the very edge of the roof, Blizzard Ben stood erect, holding Boss Cole high above his head, but, despite his bold attitude, seeming likely to come down, prospective mayor and all, to serious injury if not to death.

"Hello! you black-an'-tan sardines!" shouted the Thunderer, "cast your eyes on ther champion Cole-heaver o' Arizony. Pay your quarter an' then go on ter ther side-show fur lemonade."

No answer at once came from the miners. Men were there who were ready to fight first, last and always under Boss Cole's banner, and men who were preparing to cast their votes against him; but the possibility of his coming up to the next roll-call on a shutter glued their lips.

"How much am I offered fur this statue o' Judas Iscariot? Artemus Ward ain't alive ter

take it an' it must go ter ther highest bidder on ther grounds. Who makes an offer? Will the patriotic men I see under me let this nat'r'nal-born curiosity fall inter ther hands o' Barnum?"

A moment of silence followed. Cole dared not for the life of him squirm or say a word to irritate his captor, and though his friends below had sized the situation they did not exactly see what card they could play to pull the chestnut out of the fire.

Finally an angry voice sounded from the crowd.

"See hyer, you durnation idiot, you'll hev a murder on your hands in a minute."

"So you are still there, be you, Dave Connors?" retorted Ben, quickly. "I say, pass up another cup o' that whisky, will ye?"

"I'll shoot you ef you don't release your prisoner."

"Blaze away, but you know ther shot that speaks dooms ther straight-out candidate. 'Sides, it won't hurt me. My death-bullet ain't molded. Lord! it takes a good-sized cannon-ball ter break ther skin o' ther cyclone on stilts. Look out, you delegates, or I'll breathe har from my lower chest an' send you down ter ther Gila ter drink."

The Cole men were uncertain what to do. Temporarily, at least, Blizzard Ben held the drop. With one motion he could cast their leader to the ground, and though the fall might not in any degree injure him, it was more probable that a broken leg, back or neck would be the result. They could shoot the rioter where he stood, but how about Cole?

Hurriedly they consulted together. Some of them were in favor of going inside the hotel and taking the Thunderer in the rear, but this little move bade fair to fail because the landlord had barred and barricaded the door.

One of the crowd attempted to climb to the piazza, but Earl Chester caught and pulled him back. The fellow wheeled, knife in hand, but a gentle crack from Earl's fist induced him to lie down, and when he arose he threw up the contract for climbing the piazza.

While this scene was transpiring at the hotel, a number of men were in a cabin near at hand and engaged in an earnest conversation.

Chief among them was one Moses Chick, otherwise called Chicken Mose. According to the name and the sobriquet, he should have been a *tender* man, but the records of Keno Camp showed him to be a notorious "tough." In fact, he had long been a bully and blackleg, and it was to get rid of him and others of his class that many good citizens were anxious to have a lawful mayor.

Chick was a bad man of the worst kind. Every crime known to the West was traceable to his door, and the only wonder was that he had never shaken hands with Judge Lynch. He had been a terror in Keno Camp, for he had not one redeeming virtue, but at his back were others of the same kind, for the embryo city was not a moral place by a wide margin.

Now, Chicken Mose was in one sense of the word an ambitious man. True, he had no desire to become respected or looked up to as a moral man, a reformer or a *doer-of-good* in any way; but he had always enjoyed his position as bully of Keno Camp, and on this eventful day a new idea had crept into his head.

Keno Camp wanted a mayor, and as the ripples started for Buck Arnold had swelled into a tidal wave, it occurred to Mose Chick that while the voting was going on it would not be a disagreeable thing to have his friends chip in and give him a lift.

Three candidates in the field would divide the vote and kind of even things up.

Accordingly, Chicken Mose had assembled his followers, and, in a well-attended and enthusiastic caucus, he was putting his best foot forward with a view to soon making a cross on the official documents when some more scholarly clerk signed the name of Mayor Chick.

He was unanimously nominated by the harmonious crowd, a few wires were laid in deep water, and then Chick leaped down from the chair on which he had stood.

"Come, pard's," he said, "let's liquor. Lem Cole's bar'l ain't empty yit, and what enthusiasm we kin draw from its bowels is all cl'ar gain. Kim, that whisky mustn't be allowed ter spile."

And the Chick crowd staggered back to the scene of battle.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FACTIONS SHAKE HANDS ACROSS THE BLOODY CHASM.

BLIZZARD BEN held the drop. There was no question about it, for though exposed to hostile

bullets, Boss Cole was his shield and buckler. The giant had come down the roof like a cat, but even if Cole had been alone and unmenaced by an enemy, he could not have kept his place on the incline.

He hadn't that kind of a head.

As it was, he was shaking with a coward's fear. The playful Thunderer no longer held him at arm's length, but in a sort of pet-grizzly embrace, where he was alternately rolling him like a mud-cake and addressing the crowd.

"Dave Connors," he said, eyeing the overseer sharply, "why won't you come up an' take this case o' small pox off my hands? I ain't no more use fur him than I have fur a lookin'-glass, though he ain't so dangerous. He tried a shot at me but I ain't vicious, and I want ter see him voted for in ther municipal blow-out. Strikes me ther hour o' 'lection is some ways in ther rear. Ef ther sun don't say two o'clock I'm a liar."

"See hyar, Blizzard Ben," grated the overseer, "do you know what you are doin'?"

"Hangin' on, es ther boy said when he went stealin' watermelons and caught a dog's teeth in his trowsers."

"You have assaulted ther foremost citizen o' this town, an' Jedge Lynch is makin' a rope fur you."

"Let him keep it under kiver until it is wanted."

"I swear by ther saints you shall hang ef you don't give up your prisoner an' vamose this town on ther run."

"Don't swear; your word goes es fur es your oath."

"What do you propose ter do, anyhow?"

"Start a show with this critter fur a twenty thousand dollar beauty," Blizzard Ben answered, with a grin.

Just how the discussion would have ended if not infringed upon is uncertain, for it was brought to a climax by a move on the part of some person just behind the crowd. An overzealous friend of Boss Cole had gone to a suitable place and with his rifle drawn a bead on the Thunderer.

While the previous conversation was going on, this man had been glancing through the double-sights, and as Ben spoke the last word there was a sharp crack, and the Leadville man staggered, tried to regain his balance and then fell flat on the roof.

The mishap caused him to break his hold on Cole, and in a twinkling after the luckless "boss" went rolling over the eaves into the crowd below.

Blizzard Ben naturally started on the same road, but as he passed the edge, his grasping hands caught the gutter and then he hung dangling in the air.

A tremendous roar arose from the crowd. Cole had come down to dig a furrow in the sand, after the fashion of a patent plow, and when Ben was seen hanging above like a huge bunch of fruit from a tree, an excitement sprung up which deepened into a prolonged howl.

Lodestone Dave deliberately drew his revolver, took aim and pulled the trigger, but only the snap of the hammer followed. He had forgotten that when he once before tried his luck on the Thunderer he had used his last cartridge.

"Give me a weepo, somebody!" he snarled. "Ef that cuss ain't wiped out he'll raise a riot in Keno Camp."

A revolver was thrust into his hand, but as he raised it a strong hand spun him around like a top and he looked to see Earl Chester standing beside him with flashing eyes.

"Ruffian and coward!" cried the young man, "would you commit murder?"

Connors answered by attempting to turn the revolver upon this new enemy, but Earl knocked the barrel up with one hand and with the other sent the overseer on a gymnastic tumble where he eventually brought up against Cole, who had been dug out of his burrow, not much the worse for his fall; and master and man went over in a confused heap.

The shouts of the crowd increased to a perfect Babel of howling. Keno Camp had been in a happy, drunken mood when Blizzard Ben came to town, and it had borne all the previous ripples with composure, but the air was getting too sultry for endurance and they began to thirst for gore.

Out came several scores of revolvers, fierce looks and fiercer words were exchanged, but at that crisis Buck Arnold sprung into the breach.

"Hands up, every man!" shouted the veteran. "Remember this is ther day we celebrate an'

don't let it be said Keno Camp was baptized in gore. Some of yez are carryin' your playfulness too fur, but let all get off your high horses and come down ter reason. Let us hev peace."

His voice was like oil on the troubled waters, and it needed only one more shout to make the stalwart men drop their hands and stand, still scowling, but not inclined to immediate hostility.

The one cry they had heard was:

"Look at ther ruff!"

There was a cause for the words. Ben, hanging by his arms, had tried to draw himself up on the roof, but it was a feat even he could not accomplish. Once he raised himself until his chin was some distance above the gutter, but as there was no place to gain a hold above he could not go further.

In this predicament, and while considering the advisability of dropping to the ground before he was hit by a bullet, a shout from above arrested his attention, and he looked up to see the man Shirley at the skylight, while from his hand a rope trailed to the eaves.

"Catch on!" directed Shirley, "and be spry about it unless you want a lead pill in your bandbox."

The Thunderer needed no second bidding but caught at the rope. It had been knotted at frequent intervals, and as it was firmly held from above he was soon going up the roof like a cat.

At this point came the shout from below, but if any of them aspired to sling lead at the Thunderer just then they gave no sign and he went safely through the trap-window.

"Durn my mules!" he at once said, "I owe you one, Shirley. I saddled a buckin' hoss o' ther wust kind just then an' he bode fair ter shake me off. Put it thar, pard, an' ef you ever find bed-rock in dead 'arrest, whisper ther fact to ther cyclone on stilts."

"I don't try house-top promenades," said his rescuer, in a quiet, dry manner that seemed common to him.

"It was boyish, ole man, but I come inter this town ter kick up a dust, an' I've done it. You said you had no love fur Lem Cole. Be you willin' ter cast a vote ag'in' him fur mayor o' this camp?"

"Well, yes. At any rate, I shall not vote for him."

"Good enough. Now, I'm goin' out ter see 'em ag'in. Ef they want fight, I'm thar; ef it be peace, I'll ketch onter an olive branch an' howl es loud es any fur peace."

"Judging from appearances, I should say they might possibly tell you to vamose the town."

"I sha'n't go; I come ter stay, an' when I take root I can't be shook off. But ef it should come ter that, Lem Cole's gang will find they can't sway Keno Camp as much as they uster."

The two men went down and found the landlord at the door, rifle in hand. He was still standing guard over his premises, and his face had a troubled look, but it brightened at sight of the Thunderer.

"They're callin' fur you outside," he said.

"Like es not," responded Ben, with a grin. "They fairly pant ter chuck my lily-white neck inter a hangman's noose, but it can't be did. Open ther winder an' warn'em ter disperse in ther name o' law. Say I'm hyer, heeled ter kill, that I am a graduate o' a bad man's school, an' that when I flap my wings ther American eagle crows."

"Oh, dry up!" the landlord said, impatiently. "Ther critters ain't howlin' fur blood now. They mean peace, an' your backer, Earl Chester, speaks fur them."

"Is ther boyee thar? Then let me whisper with him. His information may refer ter ther strawberry mark on my arm or ther chances o' gettin' another drink o' Boss Cole's whisky."

The speaker put his mouth to the keyhole and soon opened up communication with the outside speaker, who was indeed Earl Chester. The substance of the communication was that a strong sentiment of compromise was going the rounds outside. Each and every man seemed anxious to abandon quarreling and settle down to the business of electing a mayor; and Lemuel Cole, with characteristic shrewdness, had hit the crowd hard when he mounted a barrel and said that though the "fun" of the day had been a little rough, he was willing to let bygones be bygones, and proceed to make Keno Camp a full-fledged city.

Thus it was that Earl Chester was seeking audience with Blizzard Ben, and was speedily admitted to the hotel.

"Is there a sting behind all this sweetness?" he asked.

"Wal, as nigh as I kin size it, Lem is afeard

that with each flyin' minute his chances are slippin' away, so he thinks ther sooner ther vote comes, ther better will be his prospect. See? Now, o' course ther may be summut behind that, but it won't do fur our wing ter be backward in this peace biz. Them galoots outside are shakin' claws an' drinkin' whisky, so we may as well go out."

"You are not heeled."

"True fur ye. D'ye see that pistol?" He held up a revolver which was minus a hammer.

"Yes."

"It saved my skin on ther ruff. When I fell down it was ther force o' ther ball, but it didn't tech me. It hit ther barker and broke off ther hammer; an' that is why I am not heeled at all." "Your rifle is outside, in good condition, and I know the landlord keeps small arms to sell."

Thus pointedly invited, the man produced his stock and Blizzard Ben purchased a revolver and long-bladed bowie. The price was reasonable, for mine host did not care to see the Thunderer on a rampage again, and he looked liable to be easily "riled."

After this Ben and Earl went outside.

All signs of excitement had vanished, and the men stood around as peacefully as though a cloud had never crossed the horizon of Keno Camp.

Blizzard Ben strode forward, and then mounted the same barrel from which Dave Connors had lately declaimed.

"Hear ye! hear ye!" cried the giant, "Blizzard Ben, ther cyclone on stilts an' ther African simoon, gives greeting. He has seer, you shake hands an' his heart is glad. It's indeed high time that somebody was elected mayor o' this hyer burgh, an' I ain't ther man ter kick over ther traces. I b'lieve in law an' jestic, an' I'm the only bad man in the West that kin show a diploma. You've all shook hands but me, an' I'm achin' ter larn ther grip. Thar be them hyer with whom I won't shake, but I kin see an honest man afore me. You pilgrim with ther red nose, come forruds an' shake."

No one stirred. Everybody knew who was meant, but that particular individual, a red-nosed bummer, stared from side to side as though ignorant of the honor tendered him.

CHAPTER VII.

"THE BALLOT BOX HAS BEEN STUFFED."

"It's you I mean," said the Thunderer, leveling his long finger at the red-nosed man. "There ain't another galoot o' ther kind in this burgh. That nose shines like a beacon at all hours. Why, put a psalm-book ou et an' folks would take it fur a pulpit with red-plush cushions."

"Let up!" howled the red-nosed man. "I don't want no row, but I won't be picked upon. Ef my nose has peculiarities, my money paid fur them, an'—"

"Your money! Why, you old bummer, you never had three bits in your hands in your life."

A voice from the crowd said this, and the slandered man began to look for him with the care of a man who don't want to find what he seeks for. Though an admirer of bruised lemon mixed with whisky and sugar, the red-nosed man was not, strictly speaking, a bruiser.

The little ripple soon subsided, and then a preliminary peace-talk was held before the voting began.

Everybody knew by this time that Buck Arnold was going to run against Boss Cole, but his supporters preferred to talk by their votes only; and the straight-out wing, feeling pretty confident, quietly ignored the signs of a bolt, and preparations for the grand event began.

Meanwhile, several little axes were being ground behind the scene.

Mose Chick, alias Chicken Mose, had not outgrown his ambition to fill the mayor's chair. On the contrary, it had grown with his growth until it had assumed imposing form.

The movement was not to be despised. The town had an unpleasantly large sprinkling of rough characters, and all these, led on by a careful canvass, were sure to place their ballots in the box for the election of the champion rough. Yet, as the crisis approached, Chick moved around about his adherents and engaged in the work of stiffening their backbones and his boom went on famously.

Boss Cole did not suspect that a third party was to be in the field, but he did perceive that men were talking well of the man who had crossed the Sierras with John C. Fremont, and, with some little fears as to the result, he sought out the red-nosed man.

"Dunn," he said, "I have work for you."

"Name it," the red-nosed man promptly answered.

"You may miss some fun by it."

"I may get some."

"More likely, you will get your eyes scratched out."

"Ha! ther is a woman in the scrape."

"There always is. Dunn, you know me pretty well and can guess what I want. My chief object in seeking to be mayor has been to get my hands on Lillian Danton and the Saco mine, but now this bolt seems likely to make some other man ruler of Keno Camp."

"A snap-shot will send Buck Arnold a-flukin' ter Abraham's bosom."

Cole shook his head.

"It won't do. Another man would answer their purpose just as well, and, besides, there are men backing him whom we don't want to anger. That Blizzard Ben is a perfect fiend when he gets to going. I knew him up in Leadville. This exaggerated talk is not vain boasting, but the playfulness of a grizzly bear in a peaceful mood; but let the villain get his back up and Arizona ain't big enough to hold him."

"He don't want to fool 'round me," frowned Dunn, who had not forgotten the Thunderer's attack on his nose.

"And you don't want to fool around him," said Cole, dryly. "But, never mind that. As I said before, I have work for you. I fear that all may not go well for us and I would provide for possible failure. Win or lose, sink or swim, I propose to have Lillian Danton myself. Consequently, I want you to go to her house, abduct her and get to my residence as soon as possible."

"Ain't that a little risky?"

"Why so? We are not in the East, you know."

"Oh! it wouldn't be risky fur an ordinary occasion, but with Blizzard Ben, Arnold an' ther rest a-howlin', they might take up her fight ef they knew on't."

"That's jest why I want her seized early. You can be one of the first to vote and then, with two good men to help you, slip quietly away to the Danton cabin. I'll pay you well."

"I'm your man, squire. What is to be done with ther old woman. She will kick like a steer when we freeze ter Lil."

"Knock her on the head. No, wait; that won't do. Use her sort of gently, but tie her up hand and foot, and then leave her in a comfortable place. We don't want Keno Camp calling me bad names."

It did not take much longer to arrange matters, and then Dunn went to find his assistants, while Cole walked over to where Lodestone Dave was superintending preparations for the voting.

Note-paper had been procured of the landlord of the Pilgrim's Rest and distributed so that the names could be written thereon—for Keno Camp could not hope to handle the elaborately-printed ballots of the Eastern cities; a lead pencil made a mark which would tell their choice.

The ballot-box was equally primitive. An empty dry-goods case had been deposited on the whisky-barrel and a hole cut in the cover; a box big enough to hold the vote of all Arizona, but one which would give good accommodations to the hundred and twenty-seven votes expected in Keno Camp.

Cole and Connors had thought of objecting to the vote of Blizzard Ben, since he had been but two or three hours in town, but it might anger the opposition if he was challenged and it was well to begin soft and easy.

All was ready at last and, with the ballot-box guarded by Cole, Connors, Arnold, Chester, Blizzard Ben and Shirley, who had been so active in preparing the box that Connors caught the idea that he was a personal supporter, the voting began.

Dunn was first to cast his ballot, and then, one after another, the bronzed miners walked up to exercise their freeman's privilege.

It did not take a great while for the hundred and twenty-seven to vote, and then Shirley, Cole, Chester and Arnold sat down to count the ballots. Connors kept out because he was not good on the count, and Moses Chick, equally lame in that line, could only hang over the back of Shirley's chair and watch with a face like that of a hungry wolf.

He wanted to be mayor and he had the disease bad.

The first slips of paper bearing the name of Moses Chick occasioned no comment, but as his pile steadily increased the counters began to look surprised.

On the case, which had been turned bottom

upward, three little heaps of paper began to arise and it was evident that the contest was a close one. Not a "scattering" vote was there; either Cole, Arnold or Chick had taken in every voter's ballot.

Dunn and his two allies had gone on the mala-ly errand of stealing Lillian Danton, but, excepting them, every man in Keno Camp was gathered around, watching and reckoning the chances with intense interest.

The ballots were assorted; it only remained to count them.

One pile was given to Shirley, one to Chester and one to Cole. In the East, candidates do not usually have the chance to manipulate the votes so freely, but Lemuel Cole had been considered one of the pillars of Keno society; and under the close scrutiny to which he was subjected, he knew and the others knew that any funny business would send him to Charon's ferry on the jump.

Almost together the three counters neared the end of their labors and the interest was painful. Not a word broke the silence, even the breathing seemed subdued; the whole crowd, composed as it was of brawny miners who would as soon fight as eat, looked more like sleeping panthers than anything else; and yes the majority of them meant well and would act well if all "was on ther squar".

Cole was the first to finish, and he looked completely dumfounded and broken up; but as the others raised their heads he made his announcement in a clear voice, and the others followed.

"Moses Chick fifty votes!" announced Cole.

"Lemuel Cole, fifty votes!" added Chester, his face falling; for if one hundred votes had been given Cole and Chick together, but twenty-seven were left for Buck Arnold.

Shirley came in cheerfully at the end, last but not least.

"Buck Arnold, fifty votes!" he placidly said.

And then the men of Keno stared each other in the face for several minutes in silence. The fact that the three candidates should receive exactly the same number of votes was calculated to complicate matters and furnish a singular coincidence; but it faded into insignificance before the problem of how a hundred and twenty-seven men had managed to cast a hundred and fifty ballots.

It was Lemuel Cole who broke the silence by springing to his feet.

"By the Lord Harry!" he cried, "there is treachery here; the ballot-box has been stuffed!"

"Right you are," said Earl Chester, promptly; "and some one ought to know who was at the bottom of it. Whoever has been tampering with the returns is a fool, for there is a way to settle the whole matter. Let us divide and stand up as men, not slips of paper, to be counted. We won't hold any useless talk, but let the matter be practically decided."

"Hold on!" said Chicken Mose; "I claim ther election on ther returns."

"On what ground?"

"First, that ther youngster we call Ned Norris is a girl, not a man. Nate Johnson brung her hyer when he was alive, as she could do better as a man than in female gowns; but no woman's vote counts in Keno Camp. She went fur Lem Cole, which reduces his vote ter forty-nine, an' he gets left."

"What's that got ter do with Buck Arnold's vote?" roared Blizzard Ben.

"Nothing; but ther fact that you never saw this burgh till four or five hours ago makes you ineligible. You can't vote, an' that blocks Arnold's game an' leaves me one ahead o' either him or Cole."

"I say I kin vote, you homely cuss!" cried the Thunderer. "I kin vote anywhar ther American eagle flaps his wings. I was borned on United States s'ile, o' white parients, an' no man kin bluff me outer my rights. Don't ye try it, or I'll step on ye an' you'll never be see'd ag'in. When I get mad I'm wicked, an' you want ter go slow."

"Every man who was present in Keno Camp when the voting began ought to cast a ballot," Shirley said.

"Of course they had, so let us stand out in line and be counted as I said," added Earl.

But at that point Boss Cole pushed forward. He had sent away three of his men, and a count just then would result to his injury; besides, he suspected both he and Chick would suffer if Earl Chester's idea was carried out. It must be prevented.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHICH TELLS WHAT WAS DONE BY DUNN.

The red-nosed man, or, to speak of him more respectfully, Mr. Job Dunn, only waited to see

his two assistants cast their ballots, and then hurried away on the mission marked out for him by Boss Cole.

Dunn was not a ladies' man, in any sense of the word, though he would have been but for one unfortunate fact—they wouldn't have him. Even the colored dame who scrubbed the floor at the Pilgrim's Rest turned up her nose at sight of his nose; and if, by any chance, he entrapped an unwary smile on the visage of a woman, white, black, or variegated, he sooner or later found out that it was the old cause, and the flinty-hearted damsel flung his nose in his face.

So, after they had done so much to annoy him, Dunn ceased to think of them as life's comforters, and generally let them severely alone.

Such being the case, he did not hasten toward pretty Lillian Danton with a lover's enthusiasm. In fact, if he had been sent to lasso a blind horse, he would have felt no less throbbing of the heart; but the fact that Boss Cole would pay him well stirred his heels in a lively way, warmed his old blood, and made his proboscis shine effulgently.

The red-nosed man meant to do his duty.

It was not a great way across the village, and the trio rolled up to the door of the Danton cottage. As they did so, they were not a pre-possessing-looking gang. More whisky had gone down their throats than was good for them, and they looked as though they had been indulging in a month's spree.

Consequently, when Lillian answered the summons at the door and saw them, she looked disturbed, and perhaps, a little alarmed.

"Evenin', miss, evenin'," Dunn genially said. "Be'n a warm day up ter ther present time, eh?"

"Quite warm, sir," the girl answered.

"Guess it'll be warm ter-morrer, too."

"Very likely, sir."

"Good weather fer oranges an' sich."

The red-nosed man was forgetting his errand. At variance with the fair sex as he was, the charming face of Miss Danton had touched at least one of the fibers of his heart, and he felt a desire to play the agreeable; but one of his companions kicked him on the shin, and he first executed an impromptu dance, and then came down to solid business.

"Excuse my seeming levity, miss, but you know when ther rheumatism gets a galoot under ther knee-pan it always raises him. But that is neither hyer nor thar. We've come fer you."

"Come for me?"

"That's ther size on't."

"What do you mean?"

"Wal, ter make a long story short, thar's a riot goin' on over yonder. Lead pills hev be'n chucked inter various bread-baskets, carving-knives hev be'n used fur stomach-pumps an' lancets, bunches-o'-fives hev be'n keerlessly swung, an' taken all in all, et looks es though we might give ther curriner an' grave-digger a week's job when we git time to set on ther stiffs an' plant 'em."

His eloquence was a little too obscure and rapid for Lillian to comprehend all, but she caught the drift of his communication.

"I did not suspect there was any riot, though I heard the shouting and attributed it to election enthusiasm."

"That's ther kind o' p'ison it is, an' ther boyees be jest er pourin' it down es though 'twar innocent whisky. 'Lection 'thusiasm' is ther name on't, an' it has got ther under-hold an' flung ther boyees over its head. Keno Camp bids fair ter be baptized in blood afore mornin', an' I am sent ter tell ye ter scud at once fer ther other side o' ther city."

"Who sent you?"

"Buck Arnold an' Mr. Shirley."

"Well, you can return and tell them that if they want me to leave here they must themselves call and say so."

"Eh?" stammered Dunn, blankly.

Lillian repeated her remark.

"Why, durn my eats, miss, this is rank suicide. Ther toughs o' th'r town will soon be on a rampage, an' then w'ot'll yer do hyer all alone?"

"Fight, if need be," she coolly answered.

"Would ye fight ag'in' Mose Chick's gang?"

"If Chick calis here he will find me at home and well armed. Moreover, if he tries to molest me, I shall show him whether I can hold the fort."

"But, durn it, w'ot'll Buck an' Shirley say when I tell 'em you refuse their protection?"

"I do not think you will tell them."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not believe they had any hand in sending you here," Lillian promptly replied.

The fellow gazed at her in astonishment for a moment, and the shadow of an aggrieved flush crept into his rosy nose.

"Why, durn it, marm, you don't think I'm a lyin', do ye?" he pathetically asked.

"I do not believe any of my friends sent for me. Only this morning Mr. Shirley was in here, and, as there might be wild scenes in the village before night, he strongly advised me not to leave the house under any circumstances."

"But things have changed sence Hannah died."

"There must be more of a change before Shirley will select a friend of Lemuel Cole for my protector. You can return and say as much to whoever sent you, and if he is inclined to growl, I will certify that you have done your duty."

"There you go!" howled the messenger, dramatically beating his breast. "Can't you let me alone?"

"What is the trouble?" Lillian asked, in surprise.

"I have heerd that pun until I am sick of it. Nature named me Dunn, an' everybody pokes ther name in my face. If I try to make a speech at camp-meetin', they howl, 'Ain't you done, Dunn?' If I play keerds an' lose, they sneer in my face, 'You done mighty poor, Dunn.' At all times an' places they fling out that pun, an' I'm tired on't. Even you say, 'You have done your duty.'"

"I meant no offense, and did not intend to make a pun," answered Lillian, a little amused. "I should have used the same expression if your name had been Smith, or George Washington."

"It's all right then," said the envoy, polishing his nose with his shirt-sleeve.

Just then he received another reminder that he was wasting time, and as Sam Goff's heavy boot encountered his shin he cast a furious glance at his pard but settled down to business.

"All this talk is superfluous, marm," he added, with a wave of his hand. "We were sent hyer ter carry you to a place o' safety, an' we must not neglect our duty. Ef you will chuck on yer hat we will escort you in safety."

"Not to-day, sir; I remain where I am."

"You are mad as a March hare. Why, durn my boots, ther boyees are liable ter pull down your ranch over yer head ef they git on ther rampage."

"Nevertheless, I shall stay."

The answer was a firm one, but the red-nosed man did not give up. He waxed eloquent, reminded her of the fate of unbelievers, alluded casually to Joan of Arc, Molly Stark and Grace Darling, referred to the Chinese troubles in Frisco and paid a glowing tribute to Dennis Kearney; but all his tumultuous rhetoric fell on barren soil and Lillian was not persuaded.

She would cling to her home base.

Then Dunn grew angry and suddenly planted one foot in the doorway.

"Look-a hyer!" he cried, "you've got ter go anyway. Our accommodations fur a graveyard are poor in Keno Camp, an' we don't propose ter hye you commit suicide. You are goin' with us, anyhow, an' ef you won't be gentle, we must put in a bit that'll curb ye. By fair means or foul, you must go with us!"

Mrs. Danton was looking over Lillian's shoulder, pale and trembling, but without a word at her command. She knew Dunn for a vicious rascal and feared the worst, but the girl herself remained strangely cool.

"How much was Lemuel Cole to pay you for your work?" she sarcastically asked.

The ruffian uttered an oath. Plain enough it was that words were of no avail; the girl saw through his little game and he might talk until midnight without moving her.

A slight pause followed her last words, and then he sprung forward and attempted to catch her in his arms.

Now, if the red-nosed man had been dealing with one of his own sex, he might have noticed the care with which Lillian had kept one hand behind her during this dialogue, but the idea of a woman being heeled and ready for battle was a little beyond his calculations; so, when her hand came around quickly and the muzzle of a revolver looked into his face, he took water right away and fell back a pace.

"Keep your distance!" said Lillian, steadily, "or Keno Camp will lose one of its shining lights."

It was a striking tableau, with the amazed minor ruffians in the rear, Dunn in the center, angry, amazed and furious; and in the doorway the slender girl glancing along the revolver with the coolness of an expert.

She held the drop.

One full minute the leading villain stared in silence, and then all his bull-dog pluck came to his aid. He would never be bluffed by so weak a woman as a girl of twenty years.

"Drop that weepin'" he fairly howled, "or I will knock your durned old house into mince-meat, an' give you a duckin' in ther kenyon."

"Mr. Dunn," said Lillian, with remarkable coolness, "this revolver is a thirty-two caliber. When it hits, it kills, and I know how to use it. You may have heard that I am a dead shot. Now, I swear that if you do not go away, I will send some of these slugs home. Take your choice!"

The ruffian's hand crept toward his belt. In his rage he had forgotten his orders from Cole, all except the fact that he was being defied by a girl; and in the fury of his black heart he was resolved to take a shot at her with intent to kill.

Then she played another trump.

"Keep your hands down!" she said, sharply. "I do not aspire to shed your blood, but if you try to draw a weapon, I will fire upon you. The same to your assistants."

Dunn was in a fury. He had never been so aggravatingly balked in his life, and it cut him to the heart; but the mouth of the 32-caliber looked into his face like a cannibal asking for supper, the plated barrel gleamed behind and he felt that he might lose past, present and future, so far as this world was concerned, if he made an advance.

Just when he was most at a loss, however, a shout sounded from down the street and Lillian's gaze wavered and turned away.

It was just the opportunity for which the red-nosed man had longed, and with a tremendous bound and outstretched arms he sprung forward to seize her.

CHAPTER IX.

CHICK FLAPS HIS WINGS.

Boss COLE came to the front determined to postpone the showing of hands for the time being, for he was shrewd enough to know that if the men stood up to be counted, Buck Arnold would have a clear plurality, probably fifty followers out of the hundred and twenty-seven voters; while the ballot-box had been about equally stuffed by Chick and himself, so that they would fall down to about thirty-eight each.

"I think our best course is to adjourn until to-morrow," he blandly said.

"This is the proper time to settle the matter," answered Earl Chester, quickly. "We are all here, and when once the matter is decided the agony will be over; whereas, if left to ferment for any length of time, the situation may grow to something serious."

"That's ther precise size on't," added Blizzard Ben. "We hev shook hands across ther bloody chasm, an' ther American eagle is whoopin' her up ter see another free city founded on ther sile o' Arizony. It does my eyes good ter see ther ball a-rollin', an' we hev now only ter stand up in spellin'-classes, es they uster do in my old school-house, an' then ther deed is done."

"You had better dry up, you old mutton-head!" advised Mose Chick, savagely. "I hev said that your vote don't count in Keno Camp, an' I mean it. Set down, will ye, yer blamed idiot?"

"No, I won't," the Thunderer answered.

"Then you shall be made ter. Lemuel Cole, ain't this cuss ther cause o' too much unpleas-antness in this burgh?"

"Yes," Cole promptly answered.

"Hadn't he oughter be run out?"

"He certainly had."

"Then out he goes. Blizzard Ben, hear ye: You are hereby expelled from Keno Camp, an' ten minutes are given ye in which ter vamose. Ef ye ain't gone then, ye will be helped out, an' ef you kick ag'in' ther pricks, Jedge Lynch will take a hand in ther game."

The Thunderer burst forth into loud laughter.

"Listen to ther coyote howlin' in ther trees!" he shouted, shaking his ponderous fist at Chick. "Ther voice o' prophecy is big within my buckskins ter-day, an' I tell ye Mose Chick will be gathered ter his fathers ef he don't let up on his cussedness. I say it, an' I'm hyer ter prove it. I'm a graduate o' a bad man's school, an' when I hit out from ther shoulder, ther air cracks from ther shock like a pistol. I'm a t'arin' whirlwind, an' a cyclone on stilts. Go an' put your head asoak, Chick."

While he had been speaking, Cole had moved around to the side of the leader of the roughs, and those who saw a few rapid words spoken between them suspected that an alliance was

being formed. Their forces, combined, would outnumber those of Blizzard Ben and his friends, and make matters a little sultry for the reform element.

"Fur ther last time," said Chick, "will you go peaceably?"

The Thunderer strode forward a little and stood in the center of the ring, facing the last speaker. They were surrounded on all sides by the Keno men, but each one had quietly ranged himself where his sympathies went, and Arnold's supporters had one side and those of Chick and Cole the other.

Every man there present was on the half-trigger, ready to hold his hand or fight, as events might determine, and in their scowling faces was the photograph of a grim resolution.

"You skunk o' misery!" howled Blizzard Ben, in answer to the last words of Chick, "do you mean that? I ask you, fa'r, do you really mean it?"

"Bet your boots, you loud-mouthed clam."

"Then," said Ben, placing his arms akimbo, "let's see you run me out. You're ther man ter do it, fur you are howlin' like a hyena, an' I want ter see you do it. Come an' see me!"

No man had ever called Mose Chick a coward, for there was no room to hang the accusation. Brave he was, like a bulldog that fastens his teeth with unreasoning courage; and though the Thunderer had proved himself a pretty good man since he came to town, and humiliated LodeStone Dave and Boss Cole, the king of the toughs had no disposition to shirk a fight with him.

Forward a pace he came, and then they stood facing each other. Both had weapons in their belts, but Ben still stood with his bare hands on his hips, and though Chick had his doubled up like sledge-hammers, he kept them from his belt.

A dead bush was on the crowd, for if those men fought it would be a meeting of giants.

Blizzard Ben was taller and heavier than his foe, but the latter had gained his laurels as bully by actual merit, and his friends looked to see him demolish the festive Thunderer.

For a full minute the two looked each other silently in the eyes, and then Chick spoke.

"Who are you starin' at, durn ye?"

"At you, you homely critter," Ben good-naturedly replied. "I was wondering why they didn't charter you fur a scarecrow whar you was raised."

"I come from whar they hev men," Chick declared.

"An' that's why they sent you away. Wal, we've got one item o' your personal history."

Chick answered by shooting out one of his hands suddenly. The thumb and its finger neighbor were separated by two inches, giving the impression that he intended to catch Ben's nose in the trap thus formed, but the giant quickly shot up his own hand, which closed over that of Chick in exactly the same fashion as though they were about to shake han's in a most fraternal way.

Warm the grip certainly was on the part of Blizzard Ben, for, putting out all of his immense strength, he pressed the bully's hand until the bones seemed about to give away together.

The fellow wanted to dance with pain, but that would never do, and he shot out his left hand in an attempt to knock his enemy over.

There was some science in the blow, but it met with a disastrous fate. Quietly the cyclone put up his own hand again, once more catching Chick as before, and then the rough found both his hands in that relentless grip.

An oath which ended in a howl burst from his lips, and he tried to plant his foot in Ben's stomach, but the latter evaded the kick, and then, swinging steadily on his heel, put forth all of that great strength which lay in his long arms and ponderous shoulders, and, still holding Chick by the hands, swung him clear of the ground, then further around, until, with a tremendous effort, he cast him from him, and the bully shot over the heads of his followers, to come crashing down on the sand beyond the circle.

Never before had the men of Keno seen such an exhibition of strength, and a shout arose from the reform element, while even some of those in the allied bands uttered a murmur of admiration.

But Chick, though he had received a severe shock, arose gamely from the sand, and rushed through the men between him and the Thunderer.

He had drawn a revolver as he came, and when he broke through the crowd and raised the weapon, it looked as though nothing could save Blizzard Ben.

"Curse you!" he howled, "you have sealed your own fate. Yer can't go from Keno an exile; you shall stay a corpse."

His hand was on the trigger, but Ben did not waver. Out from his belt he had drawn a keen knife, and as Chick paused to vent his fury in words, the knife came up like a flash, glimmered around his head for a moment, and then shot through the air like a ray of bright light.

Down went the bully's pistol, still loaded, and he stood with a terrible glare on his face, looking at his revolver-hand, for right through the palm the knife had gone, only stopping when the hilt struck flesh.

"Deathter ther outlaw!" yelled one of Chick's men; but Buck Arnold stepped between the scowling factions.

"Hold, right hyer," he sternly said. "We don't want fightin' hyer, fur Keno Camp has no men ter lose in broils. No city will prosper that is baptized in blood, fur I've helped start off twenty-seven sense I tramped 'cross country with John C. Fremont, an' I've observed them well. Let us have peace!"

His solemn words had their effect on many men, but Mose Chick, disregarding his spitted condition, bent forward and caught up the fallen knife with his left hand.

"We'll see who wins in ther end!" he hissed.

But Boss Cole caught his arm as he raised it for a bead.

"Let up," advised the mine-owner. "No one man here can cope with Blizzard Ben, and a general fight will wipe out one-half of Keno Camp. Let me talk softly to them, and, my word for it, we will spring some trap on them before morning which shall give us control of affairs."

Ordinarily Mose Chick was not easily turned from his purpose, but he began to feel faint from the loss of blood, and he said no more, but allowed one of his adherents to lead him away where the knife could be withdrawn from his hand and the wound dressed.

"Hello, old jewsharp!" said the Thunderer; "what mischief be you plottin' now?"

"I am here to counsel peace and stand up to be counted with Buck Arnold. I have been and am still anxious to be mayor of Keno, but, as Buck says, the city must not begin its life in a deluge of blood. To-day we are angry, excited—and, perhaps, a little the worse for liquor. Therefore, let us adjourn until to-morrow, and then meet to settle this mixed up matter amicably."

"Agree to his proposition," Shirley said, to Blizzard Ben and Buck Arnold. "The sly rascal has some scheme in his head, but we can't afford to engage in a pitched battle, and I guess our wits are as good as his."

Even Ben was anxious to agree to this truce, for the latter felt sure that the backbone of Boss Cole's power was broken, and he did not care to sacrifice any lives in his crusade. And then, if the worst came, he was no longer friendless, as when he came to Keno Camp, but with fifty men enlisted in his cause, including Earl Chester, Buck Arnold and Shirley.

So the truce was agreed to by all, and Cole advised his adherents to go about their business as usual and let no private bickering cause trouble. As for himself, he had been severely used, but he was willing to bury the hatchet until the city was chartered, and then leave all to law.

Having delivered this patriotic address, he turned to go away, but Dave Connors followed him.

"Where so fast?" the overseer asked.

"Well, David, to tell the truth, I am going a-courtin'. Not in the style of the present day, but according to that in vogue in the old feudal days of other countries, when men had to steal their brides. I have sent Dunn and two men to seize Lillian Danton and bear her to my cottage, and they ought to arrive by the time we reach there."

"Good Lord! are you in 'arrest?"

"Why not?"

"Thar will be a terrible uproar when it is known that you have stole her."

"Of course there will, but the uproar has got to come anyway. We mu't chastise these mutineers, and I preferred to first make sure of the girl. I'll first have a little talk with her to settle the matter of who is boss in Keno, and then you and I will put our heads together to make it dog-day weather for our enemies. The ring-leaders must be taken in out of the wet."

CHAPTER X.

EARL BETS ON THE QUEEN.

MEANWHILE, the leaders of the Arnold faction were not idle. A little waiting sufficed for

them to see that the Cole-Chick combination was going to act on the exclusive plan, despite the boss's orders for all to fraternize; for that select crowd at once turned their backs on their rivals and showed signs of encamping around the Pilgrim's Rest.

Such being the case, the Arnold men imitated their example and meandered toward the western end of the town.

Buck had thrown off the hesitancy he had at first shown when named for mayor. He did not aspire to the office, but it had come to him unsought and he resolved to do his best for his party.

And in Arizona, the best is usually well up in the king-row, for politicians there seldom have to write letters which may entangle them in meshes afterward.

Blizzard Ben clearly saw that Buck and Shirley were fully capable of caring for their flock, so he went over to Earl Chester and touched him on the arm.

"Let's take a walk," he said.

"That's what we are doing now, isn't it?"

"Yas, but I mean by ourselves. I want ter make a call on some female friends o' mine, an' I want you along with me."

"Well, I sha'n't refuse, but don't ask me to take a hand in your game. Let me sit by the door and keep watch for breakers. I don't bet very heavy on the female population of any town, and my only objection to card-playing is that every pack has at least four queens."

"Durn your mule-team, that's not ther proper way ter speak o' ther fair sex."

"Benjamin," said the man from California, "there was a time when I chanted their praises from sun-up to sunset. That was when, down in Santa Barbara, I got struck on a black-eyed Spanish girl. She was a thoroughbred of tremendous pedigree and clean-cut as a statue, so I allowed I had tumbled on a pretty good thing. One day Dolores Enriqua del Sol y Luna—such was her modest name—h'isted too much *aguardiente* and went on the war-trail. She salivated a sheriff, winged his deputy, creased a dry-goods clerk and set fire to a church, and when they finally got the drop on her she was given fifteen years behind bars. Since then, when women come to the front I slip back to the rear to see that the ambulances are all right."

The Thunderer laughed at this melancholy story, for he shrewdly suspected that Earl was paying him off for his own bombastic words of the past; but the incident made him determined that his young pard should know and admire Lillian Danton.

She was not the kind of a person the Spanish beauty had been said to be. If ever a lady stepped into Arizona, Lillian was all that the name implied; and if scornful Earl Chester was a woman-hater he should have a chance to test the sincerity of his position.

They reached the Danton cabin, and a knock brought Miss Lillian herself to the door.

"Evenin'," said the Thunderer, genially; "how is every thing around this bower?"

"All is well, Ben, and we have been looking for you. Will you come in?"

She had flashed a quick glance at Earl, but her gaze soon returned to the elder man.

"Don't keer ef we do, fur thar is some news ter expound. Miss Danton, this hyer is Earl Chester, a man who is on the right side in this 'lection scrape."

Lillian gave her hand frankly.

"Mr. Ben's friends are always welcome," she quietly said, "and I am interested in the affairs of Keno Camp just at present."

"So we all are, miss," said the man from Santa Barbara, speaking with strange politeness for a woman-hater. "Matters have been a little equinoctial this afternoon, and it has roused us out of slothfulness."

"You will find an old friend inside, Mr. Ben," continued the girl; "one whom you have seen in Leadville. You remember my late brother's friend, Mike Mulloy!"

"Who?" demanded Ben, in evident surprise.

"Mike Mulloy."

"What! not that freckled-faced, red-headed young rascal?"

"The very same," answered Lillian, smiling brightly.

"Wal, I'll be durned; Mike hyer, ther original Mike? Wal, durn my mule-team ef that ain't quar."

"An' phat is there quare about it, ould man?" demanded a jolly voice; and beside Lillian's shoulder appeared a fat, freckled face, which was framed-in by a head of carrotty-red hair.

The face and its owner looked like a reflection of a nature after the fashion of Conn, the Shaughran, and the good-humor of the round

visage so impressed Earl, that he was not surprised to see Ben freeze onto the extended hand in a warm grip.

"Shoot me if I ain't glad," Ben declared.

"So are we all; my late brother's friends are always welcome," said Lillian.

"Jest hear the jewel, will yez? It's not fur meself I am wilcomed, but jest because I was a fri'nd ov her late brother. Bedad, an' phat would yez think to have a pritty girl talk that way to yez? I have half a mind to turn me back on Keno Camp, an' go back wid meself alone to Leadville."

"Don't yer do it, boyee," said the Thunderer. "You are needed in Keno, fur ther dorgs o' war hev be'n let loose, an' devastation is liable ter rage through all ther valley. You used to back up Lee Danton with fist and rifle; now you must do ther same by his sister."

"Depind upon it, I will, ould man. It's foightin' blood I hev in me veins, an' whin I can shed it fur me fri'nds, I like to get rid av a part av it."

All went inside, and Mrs. Danton kindly greeted the new-comers.

"We have had an adventure, Ben," said Lillian.

"Anything serious?"

"It nearly reached that point. Three men came here and attempted to abduct me; but Mike Mulloy arrived at the critical moment, and I was rescued."

"Yez should av been lookin' on just thin, Ben," said Mike, laughing. "It was a mighty funny tableau I chanced upon whin I turned dhe corner av dhe cabin. Dhere stood Miss Lillian in dhe doorway, wid a revolver p'iting right ahead av' her eyes, and forninst dhe muzzle she had three men es nicely corraled es ever yez would wish to see."

"Dhey cowered before her, did the blaggards, an' she was kapin' dhem off by dhe power av her shootin'-iron, but jest then a shout sounded from up dher strate, an' her eyes wavered. She looked to see who yelled, an' dher blaggards rushed in, so I had ter unkiver meself an' take a hand in dher scrimmage."

"And he whipped the three of them alone," said Lillian.

"Sint dhem howlin' back til dher master," added Mike. "Dhey wint in sorry plight, fur wan av them was goin' on three legs like a foundered hoss."

"What does all this mean? Who war ther men an' who war their master?" Ben asked.

"One man was named Dunn, and they confessed at the last that they were sent by Lemuel Cole."

"Aha! so ther 'tarnal critter is lettin' his mind run that way. Good! We know his weaknesses now, an' will show no mercy. I say it, an' you know my way. I'm a graduate o' a bad man's school, an' a cyclone on stilts. When I see Boss Cole, I'll puff my breath ag'in his cheek, an' he will think a black norther has struck."

Conversing in this way an hour soon slipped away. Earl Chester modestly allowed Ben to do most of the talking for their side of the house, but when the young man came to the front, his views were clearly and sensibly given.

After some time the visitors left the cabin to return to their men. There seemed little danger for the Dantons that night, for not only was the house within easy reach of the reform element lines, but Mike Mulloy would remain on deck, and he would make a good protector.

"It's durned lucky he dropped on ther corral jest as he did," said Ben, as he and Earl went away, "or we might be oblieged to make a raid on Cole right away."

"We must keep Miss Danton out of his hands," said Chester, with emphasis.

"Why so?"

"Because she is too fine a piece of female loveliness to fall into his hands. I'm backing her with bullet and steel from this out, but you needn't fling it in my face, old man. When I handle the keerds next time I shall bet my money on the queen of hearts."

At that same moment Boss Cole and his overseer were seated in a room at the Pilgrim's Rest, which had been reopened by the landlord after the riot had its relapse.

Cole did not look happy. He had just received the report of Dunn and his associates, one of whom had an ugly wound in the leg, while the red-nosed man had started a black-walnut polish on both eyes; and their inglorious failure was annoying, to say the least.

"Dave," said the mine-owner, abruptly, "something must be done or we will lose our grip on Keno Camp."

"Why not negotiate with Moses Chick? Combined, we would have at least seventy-five men against the fifty of our rivals, an' Chick may es well give up his hopes o' bein' mayor right at ther start. He couldn't hold ther reins. Just go ter him an' say ef his men will chip in an' make you mayor, he shall be sheriff."

"I doubt if he would do it, and if he did agree, that fifty, with Blizzard Ben among them, would continue to be a thorn in our flesh."

"Run him out!" snapped Connors. "Run him out, an' run out the whole caboodle ef they don't cave. Blizzard Ben ought to have a hangman's rope, but I doubt ef we have hoss-power enough to put it on. Did you see him sling Chick over ther crowd?"

"Yes."

"He's a terror."

"See here, Dave, I have an idea."

"What is it?"

For answer, Cole drew from his pocket a blank-book, wrote a few lines on one leaf and then tore it out and passed it to Dave.

"Read that," he said.

"Lord!" said Connors, grinning, "I can't do it. I'm no scholar."

"Then listen while I read:

"To the men of Bumblebee:

"We want help. The worst element of our city has arisen against the law-abiding citizens and have started a riot which threatens to ruin Keno Camp. Can you send fifty men at once to help us preserve order?"

"That won't work," said Connors.

"Why not?"

"I'm afeerd ef ther Bumblebees come they will be more likely ter stand with Arnold than with us."

"I shall fix that. This note will go to a man on whom I can depend, and if he don't come down with fifty rough-and-ready lads I shall be surprised. He won't side with Buck Arnold, for he knows and hates him. I'll send the note at once, and we will soon have things humming lively in this burgh."

CHAPTER XI.

WANTED, A HORSE.

It was just after dark when Blizzard Ben and Earl left the Danton cabin, and as it was possible that the Cole-Chick force might get ugly before morning, they resolved to have a look around the town before seeking rest.

If trouble was brewing for them in the camp of the allies they wanted to know it in advance.

They were passing in front of a sizable building which seemed to be a hotel, and was certainly a drinking-saloon, unless the big sign and red light belied its character, when the door was suddenly flung open and a woman sprung into view.

She paused for a moment, looking to the right and left as though in search of some one, and in that moment they saw that she was young and pretty; but the moment her gaze fell upon them she started forward again and came straight to where they stood.

"Oh! gentlemen," she said, "I am very much in need of help. I hate to trouble you, but my brother lies inside very ill indeed, and I want some one to get me a horse to go to Bumblebee."

Beauty in distress is always a matter which touches the average male heart, and Blizzard Ben stroked his beard reflectively.

"Wal, I dunno jest how ter help you," he slowly said. "So fur es I know thar ain't but one hoss in Keno, an' that is my old mule which is stabled in ther kenyon. You would be welcome ter ther 'tarnal critter, but you might as wal saddle a pick. Ther dumfounded old fool fell lame on ther way hyer, an' I reckon et would take about three days ter go to Bumblebee."

"Yet I must have a doctor from Bumblebee as soon as possible. Otherwise, I fear I shall lose my brother."

"What's ther matter with him?"

"It is a fever, sir."

The girl spoke absently, and stood wringing her hands as though to twist out an idea, but the idea did not seem to come.

Earl Chester pulled his mustache savagely. Despite his occasional lapse into cynicism, he had an eye for beauty and a due regard for their welfare, and he would have been glad to see this unknown dams^{el} accommodated.

Unlike Ben, he knew of a horse able to get to Bumblebee on the fly. Stabled at the Old Trust hotel was his own horse, the one which had brought him all the way from Santa Barbara, and he doubted if there was an equine in Arizona that could keep pace with it.

Mounted on this steed he could ride the twenty-five miles to Bumblebee in quick time; but in the face of his inclination was the fact that he was needed in Keno Camp—ay, more than that, he must stay.

One thing he could do—loan the horse to the girl and let her do her own errand; but against this plan were just as many objections. In the first place, he did not allow any person excepting himself to swing foot over Black Jack's back; and, secondly, there was no knowing whether this strange girl was trustworthy.

He looked at her keenly. Handsome she certainly was, with black hair and eyes, and a fine face, but at that moment she reminded him so much of the girl who was serving time at Santa Barbara for fling lead too loosely, that his sympathetic impulses went back on their record at a gallop.

He did not feel inclined to chip in.

"Poaty serious case?" Blizzard Ben asked, after the girl's last answer.

"So much so that I must have a doctor. Oh! I wish I had a good horse. These miserable creatures in the village could not go the twenty-five miles and back in time to save Tommy's life. Sir," she abruptly added, turning to Earl, "don't you know of one I can get?"

"Well, I ain't overly posted on horse-flesh about Keno, but, so far as my knowledge goes, I don't know of one you can get for love or money."

His conscience troubled him a little as he made the assertion, but she only absently said:

"I would give anything in the world for a horse."

"Brace up, little one, brace up," said Ben, sympathetically. "I'm summum o' a doctor myself, an' ef you will let me go in an' look at 'Tommy,' ineb'e be kin set him right up on his hoofs ag'in."

"No, no," she answered quickly; "no one except a regular doctor can do more than has already been done. My mother is watching him, and all we now want is a horse to go to Bumblebee for a doctor."

At that moment a young man rode in front of the house, and looked closely first at the building and then at the trio before it. Blizzard Ben sized him at once; a stranger in Keno, and very likely a tenderfoot in Arizona; a good-hearted young lad just broken loose from the apron-strings, and, moreover, the owner of a good horse.

He hesitatingly inquired if the house was a hotel, and when the girl had answered in the affirmative, in her absent way, he was slowly dismounting, when she aroused and went for him in the same way she had attacked the others. Plainly she was in full earnest about having a horse.

Tenderfoot stammered, hesitated, wavered, and finally yielded. He hated to let his steed go, even on an errand of mercy, but the black eyes of the girl hit him hard under the collar-bone, and he threw up the sponge.

Ben and Earl walked away, jesting at the expense of the tenderfoot, but they had not gone far when a horse and rider passed them at a gallop. Both were known to them; the black-eyed girl was on her way to Bumblebee.

"The case must be desprit," said the Thunderer.

"Maybe it is, but do you know I somehow feel that that girl is a humbug? There are plenty of horses in Keno, though no first-class ones as far as I know, except my own, but it looks queer to me that she should interview us. Why didn't she go to some citizen of the place?"

"Mebbe she is a new-comer hyer herself," said the Thunderer, who had himself been impressed by the black eyes.

"It may be," Earl dubiously answered.

And then they traversed the neutral ground somewhat, but, failing to find any suspicious signs, finally went back to their own quarters.

They paused for a moment at the Danton cabin and found the ladies listening to some story Mike Mulloy was telling, and the Irishman seemed so good a guard that they left him to play the part and went on to the cabin where Buck Arnold was quartered.

So far, no demonstration had been made by the Cole-Chick combination, and the man they were backing for mayor, with his feet elevated on a table, smoked his black pipe with that fervor only known to a professional.

"Wal, my Arizona cyclone," he genially said, "did you strike any signs?"

"Not that we kin sw'ar to."

"Do you suspect anything?"

"Wal, no; can't say I do. Still, ef we don't hear from them 'tarnal critters afore daybreak, I shall be mighty surprised."

"Cole has promised ter keep ther peace."

"Bah! I'm a stranger in Keno, but I've see'd enough ter-day ter make me willin' ter sw'ar his promise is es slippery es soap."

"You're talkin' truth now, pard; Lem Cole can't be trusted, an' ef he thinks he kin pull ther wool over ther eyes o' a man who has tramped three months 'cross kentry with John C. Fremont, he is off his gauge."

Just then Shirley came in hastily.

"Aha!" he said, his face lightening, "I am glad to see you all here. I have just overheard a conversation of interest. I was out on a scut when I saw two men approaching, so I hid in a nook and waited for them. They came up and proved to be Dave Connors and Dunn."

"Fit cronies," snorted Ben.

"They talked awhile in my hearing and I gathered much that was of interest. The allies intend to attack us to-night, though not an idea could I gather as to the time, the way or the means. More than that, they have sent to Bumblebee for help."

Earl Chester started out of his chair quickly.

"To Bumblebee!" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"By whom?"

The messenger was a woman. They knew one of the right kind, and, not caring to spare a man, she was sent. She went on a horse purchased—or, maybe, stolen—from a tenderfoot just in, and the idea is for her to ride like mad, even if the horse falls dead beneath her, and bring a half-hundred of toughs to the aid of Cole. Bumblebee is full of them now, since the Morgan expedition was abandoned, and they will fight like fiends for money."

"Ben," said Earl, turning to the veteran, "did I not tell you that girl impressed me unfavorably?"

"You sart'ainly did, boyee, an' you war mighty right. She was a snake in ther grass; I see all cl'arly now. Thar was no sick brother in ther case, but she was sent ter coax your hoss away from you 'cause her employers thought him ther best in Keno Camp."

"Pards," said Earl, striking the table with his fist, "that messenger must not reach Bumblebee. If she does, woe be to Keno, and woe to the cause we uphold."

"Kerrect, ter an iota," added Ben, with some excitement. "Ther boyee has sized ther situation fur all it's wuth."

"How can she be stopped?" Shirley asked.

"I will do the work," said Earl. "In the stable I have a horse which I will pit against any horse in Arizona in an equal race, and though this girl has a long start, and I know the horse she rides is a good one, I believe Black Jack and I can ride her down."

"Then up and away at once; the messenger must not reach Bumblebee. And yet, people will say it is an outrage if you stop Maggie Perkins."

"Trust me for that. Where men work in the dark against us we are justified in turning their own weapons against them. If I can ride the girl down, I will see that no proof is at hand to show that Keno Camp had a hand in the work."

Followed by Blizzard Ben and Shirley, Earl was by this time hurrying toward the stable, and, only pausing to secure a small package he had put at one side, he entered the stall and led out the horse.

Black Jack was a beauty beyond a question, and in the swelling chest, clean limbs and powerful yet nimble fashion of his whole body was every evidence of speed and endurance. In color he was jet-black, except that his fore legs were white nearly to the knee and a blaze of the same color marked his forehead.

Earl partially unrolled the bundle and took therefrom a bottle filled with some dark liquid; and this he applied to the white spots until the horse was a uniform black from hoof to ear.

Evidently the Santa Barbara man had come to Keno prepared for emergencies.

This done, he shook hands with his two friends and sprung into the saddle. Black Jack arched his neck, impatient to be gone; he was given the rein, and then the pair, master and beast, sped away in the darkness.

Once Earl Chester turned and made a gesture of farewell, and then he settled grimly down in the saddle and was off on his novel ride—to hunt down a woman!

CHAPTER XII.

BOSS COLE PLAYS THE FIRE-BUG.

LEMUEL COLE and his overseer were alone in a room at the Pilgrim's Rest, and, plainly, deep in planning and plotting. They made a good pair for low scheming, for while Cole was an adept at laying out the work, Lodestone Dave was just as good at carrying out such plans.

In the midst of their mental labors, the door opened and Moses Chick came in. He looked none the worse for the hard usage of the day, except that one hand was bandaged where it had been cut by Blizzard Ben's knife, and he nodded to the other men with the easy confidence of a man suddenly raised from the gutter by a streak of luck.

"I heerd you wanted me, 'squire," he said, addressing Cole.

"Yes, I sent a messenger requesting your presence at a consultation. The fact is, Mr. Chick, I perceive a need of a closer alliance than now exists between us. That's the only way to baffle Buck Arnold's desires."

"Come right ter ther p'int," said the bully. "I ain't no scholar, an' ef you go ter driftin' around on big words you'll floor me. What is it you want?"

"I want to make our two bands one. Combined, we have seventy-five men to pit against Arnold's fifty, and that would give us the day."

"Ain't we hangin' tergether?"

"Yes, but not permanently. What I want is to see our force march to the polls to-morrow and vote as a unit."

"For you?" said Chick, quickly.

"It is of that I would speak," said the "boss," in tones of oily blandness. "You know the old saying, 'United we stand, divided we fall.' That applies well to us. If we vote together, we carry Keno; if not, Buck Arnold takes the crown. If we combine, some one must make a sacrifice, and after all I have done I hate to give up my ambition. Mr. Chick, if you will help make me mayor, you shall be sheriff of Keno."

"Et took you some time to worry 'round to it," said Chick, grinning; "but I kin answer by a twirl o' my thumb, as 'twere, for I have expected this. Boss Cole, et is my motto ter let every man ketch his own fish. You an' me are arter a fish labeled, 'Mayor of Keno.' Ef I kin pull that fish out, he's mine; but I'll be cussed ef I furnish bait fur any other man ter scoop him in."

Chick spoke with emphasis, and not all of Cole's eloquence could move him. His ambition, avarice, and other inclinations were appealed to, but the Keno bully had settled into his tracks like a balky mule, and when he settled, he stuck.

The mine owner was mad, but he dared not anger his ally; so he held in until he was gone, and then astonished Dave Connors by the ease and rapidity with which he handled the profane words of the English tongue.

"He had better have chipped in," the boss declared. "By-and-by, when the ship of state gets to whizzing along a clear channel, all the scum will be glad to jump on. Dave, you sardine you, I'm going

to scoop in the stakes in this raffle, or bu'st my b'ler in water so deep that we will all sink."

"Just wait till Maggie Perkins brings help from Bumblebee, and then we will hev ther deadwood on 'em all," the overseer soothingly said.

"Mag will do the work, or leave the borrowed horse for the buzzards and coyotes; but I will not be idle. I am going to send two or three men into Chick's camp, and if I do not bring half of his men back to my banner I am a fool."

"They deserted you for him."

"They will come back when my agents present the case to them, for, of course, I can do far more for them in the future than Chick can. He is not fit for mayor."

"Judge Lynch ought to have ther varmint."

"I have another scheme in view."

"What is that?"

"One by which I hope to make a break in Arnold's party. Do you remember how the whole town turned out three months ago and lynched the man who set fire to the hotel?"

"Reckon I do."

"Well, I am now going over and set fire to my own house."

"Eh?"

Cole repeated his assertion.

"I don't understand," Connors slowly said.

"When the flames flash up the whole city will turn out, and, hot as is our feud, I reckon they will all be ready to put out the fire. Just then, however, I shall have a man step forward and declare that he saw the fire set by some of Arnold's gang, and if that don't create an afterwash which will swamp their boat, I am a liar."

Lodestone Dave applauded the scheme to the echo, and then they separated to put the idea into effect.

Half an hour later a cry ran through the streets which brought every man out on the jump. In the small towns of the West a fire is not the same matter that makes a dweller in a great city yawn indifferently—it ranks almost on a par with sheep-stealing.

So the Keno men, irrespective of factions, came running to the scene of action, and their faces grew doubtful at the sight. It was the house of Lemuel Cole which had been gripped by the fire-fiend, and the hope of saving it looked very small.

Water is not a drug on the market in Arizona, and though a good spring existed in a canyon a hundred yards away, the means of conveying and using the water were very inadequate.

Nevertheless, the people settled down to the work of battling the flames as cheerfully as though no ill-feeling had existed. Nearly every man had brought a bucket when he turned out, and a line of men was speedily formed from the spring to the burning house and the filled buckets were passed from hand to hand.

Their efforts were almost as futile as the throwing of a mud-pie in the ocean. The fire gained, embraced all the house, hissed and crackled its triumph, and they finally ceased operations and stood back to see the end.

"It's name is Dennis an' et must go," said Blizzard Ben.

"You must feel mighty proud o' your work," cried a man who was one of Cole's supporters.

"Wal, I've did my share," the Thunderer modestly said.

"So you hev, but I want yer ter know that sech men as you can't hang out in Keno Camp. Feller-citizens, I accuse this Blizzard Ben with settin' ther fire!"

A hush fell on the crowd and Ben looked dumfounded, but as an angry murmur arose from Cole's followers he suddenly aroused and shook his fist at his accuser.

"You durnation fool!" he howled, "be you drunk or crazy? Do ye mean ter say I set that bleeze? I, ther cyclone on stilts an' ther Arizony Thunderer? Ef you do, you are an infernal liar an' I kin cram you fifteen foot inter ther sand at one spurt."

The fellow retreated a step before this outburst of rage.

"I am not goin' ter hev any fight," he said, "fur I know Blizzard Ben kin lick me all ter pieces, but I do say he set that fire an' I kin prove it."

"This is a serious charge and you must produce your proof," said Cole, gravely. "There is bad blood in Keno, but I can hardly believe any one is bad enough to turn fire-bug. Bring out your proof, Lige Martin."

And then the accuser, who had himself helped Boss Cole to start the fire, and who had been well drilled to his work, brought forward two other men and the three swore that they had seen Blizzard Ben and Earl Chester come out of the house an hour before, and that they paused near at hand until the flames burst out.

Until the fire was seen, Martin and his friends had not suspected that any mischief was afoot, but it was now clear that they had fired the house.

A howl went up from the crowd as they finished their story, for woe be to the detected horse-thief or fire-bug of the West.

"Down with ther cusses!"

"Run 'em out o' town!"

"Give 'em over ter Jedge Lynch!"

These and similar cries arose from the Cole-Chick combination, and even the majority of Arnold's men looked grave. In their opinion, a person who would fire his neighbor's house out of revenge ought to be given over to border justice, and though Blizzard Ben and Earl Chester had made a good impression up to that time, they were strangers in Keno Camp and could not command the confidence of old settlers.

But the Thunderer sprung to the front like a tiger.

"Durn your mule-team, you skunk o' misery!" he howled, again shaking his fist at Martin, "you are ther most onmitigated liar I ever see'd, an' I'll climb ye for it or bu'st my b'ler in ten fathoms water. Me set fire ter that shanty? Me, ther human whirlwind, ther up-tarin' tornader? You're a liar, you ugly-faced thief, an' I'm a-comin' fur you. I'll chaw you into compressed beef, an'—"

"Wait!" said Shirley, coming to the front, calm as ever. "I think we can prove this trio of men liars right at the start. He says Blizzard Ben and Earl Chester set the fire, and then stood by until it burst out. Whoever framed that lie overdid the business. Earl Chester is not in Keno Camp, and has not been for two hours. I can swear to that."

Again a momentary hush fell on the crowd, but it was followed by a cheer from Arnold's men. No man's word went further in Keno than Shirley's, and his declaration seemed to settle the matter.

"Curse it," said Cole, to Lodestone Dave, "I'm afraid we have put our foot in it."

"Don't give up ther p'int," answered Connors, hurriedly. "If you talk well our men will believe you, an' we will contrive ter have a fight which will rouse up all ther old bad blood."

"Get your fighting men ready. Where is Mose Chick?"

Connors looked for the bully while Cole went again to the front, but Chick was not to be found.

He had gone away to pull the wires in his own behalf.

Boss Cole surged to the front to battle down the tidal wave set in motion by Shirley. To do this, he artfully laid two theories before the crowd. One was that his witnesses *might* have been mistaken as to the identity of Chester, but in regard to Blizzard Ben's gigantic form there could be no doubt whatever.

The second theory was that Earl Chester had returned to the city unknown to Shirley.

It was a cunning speech, both in theory and delivery, and at the end Blizzard Ben began to be the focus of more dark glances than were numbered in the Chick-Cole menagerie.

It was Dunn, the man with the red nose, who finally broke the ice. He was standing near the Thunderer, and fairly panting to do some great deed which should make his name ring through all Keno—mayhap, be telegraphed to the big cities of the East—and he secretly cocked his revolver, brought the muzzle to bear on Blizzard Ben, and opened his mouth, while his nose glowed like a danger-signal on the side where the light from the conflagration struck fair and square.

"We don't want no fire-bugs in Keno Camp," he howled, throwing up his hat. "Run this cuss outer our limits, or we sha'n't have a shanty over our heads!"

It was like touching a match to a gunpowder cask, and the last word had scarcely been spoken when the big fist of the Thunderer shot out straight and true from his shoulder.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHICK PUSHES FOR THE KING-ROW.

The red-nosed man had imagined himself in good condition for bad weather. With his revolver cocked and his finger on the trigger, he had a fine bead on the accused, and it certainly looked as though he could drop the Thunderer before he could make a move.

His mistake proved the uncertainty of human events.

Mad with righteous anger, Blizzard Ben flung his fist up and out with one motion, and while the bullet, after clipping his hat, went on a prospecting trip skyward, Mr. Dunn went down in a heap, the wash from his broken nose making a heavy sea on his throat.

Not yet was Ben satisfied, and he sprung forward to renew the attack, but a dozen of Cole's men flung themselves upon him, and the red eye of battle loomed up dense and strong.

Seeing all this, and hearing the ruffians shout for the Thunderer's blood, Shirley and Buck Arnold, with their friends, took a hand in the game and a desperate struggle began.

Revolvers cracked and bowies flashed in the light of the burning house, and men began to drop.

Blizzard Ben, despite the force of numbers hurled against him, arose like an unchained lion, flinging them back like ripe fruit, and in a moment more his bowie was out and flashing with the rest.

When such men fight in such a fashion the scene is too dreadful for description; but this particular affray was as brief as it was bloody. Neither faction coveted a fight, and as Ben shook off his foes and ranged himself beside Shirley and Buck Arnold, hands went down as though by mutual agreement; but two of Cole's men lay dead on the sand, and several on each side had *souvenirs* of the "meet."

Blizzard Ben's blood was up, and he would have gone right on with his work, but Shirley managed to quiet him; after which the quiet man stepped to the front.

"How do you like the result of your work, Cole?" he demanded, with flashing eyes.

"My work?" echoed the mine-owner. "In what way did I have a hand in it?"

"I can prove nothing, except that Blizzard Ben was in my own company at the very moment those villains say he was setting the fire. Such being the case, I believe you—yes, you, Boss Cole—put up a job to create a *rumore* against him and have him lynched as a fire-bug. If so, well and good. Your house is fast crumbling to ashes and two of your men lie there dead. How like you the result of your work?"

Cole was almost choking with rage, but he dared not raise a hand against Shirley.

"You are a fool!" he screamed, stamping angrily on the sand. "Would I burn my own house to get revenge on him? I should be a fool to do it, for houses cost—"

"Who has accused you of burning your own house?" Shirley keenly asked.

Cole started, hesitated, and began to change color.

"I thought—that is, you said—"

"What?"

"That the burning of my house was my own work."

"I said nothing of the kind. I intimated that the burning of your house was the *result* of your work; it was your own mouth that advanced the idea that the fire might have been of your own setting. Since you have given us the theory, I will admit that I believe it to be so. You found yourself in a close corner, you wanted to draw recruits from our forces; and, as your house was worth little or nothing and you had some hundred thousand dollars behind you, you thought that if by sacrificing the shanty you could get up a hue and cry against Blizzard Ben, the deed was well done!"

Straight through this sweeping accusation Shirley went in his cool, even way, and Cole was stung with a fresh fury. For the life of him he could not see how his enemies penetrated all his well-laid plans.

He did see, however, that if there had been a wavering in the Arnold faction, the gap was closing up solidly, and he burst into what he meant for an avalanche of eloquence to turn the tide.

Useless! The deed was done, and the plotter began to quail before the fierce glances showered upon him until he was glad to hear Shirley propose that the rival wings once more adjourn and try to keep the peace until morning.

Blizzard Ben panted for vengeance, for his fighting blood was hissing, but he was not the man to be unreasonable, and he went meekly away with his party.

"Matters don't look healthy fur a peac'ble 'lection ter-morrer," he grumbled, as they went.

"I've see'd wuss breaches than this healed," said Buck Arnold. "I've helped ter launch twenty-seven cities sence I come West with John C. Fremont, an' now an' then things have been squally. I reckon this affair will blow over an' *somebody* be 'lectet afore another night."

"Cole and Chick are determined to rule or ruin," said Shirley.

"Durn their mule-teams, they will ruin ef they rule," said Ben, "an' they can't come in. I've said so an' I'll stick. You hear me? I'm a graduate o' a bad man's school, an' when I shoot I hit plumb-center."

"I'm some on the shoot myself," said Shirley, quietly. "I used to be a sport, and though I've kept out of the lists for some time, I reckon I'm fated to sling lead again before long."

They were passing near the Danton cottage, and Ben, with his resolution to look after the family through thick and thin, paused near the door. All was dark and silent about the place, and he was about to go on when he saw that the door was ajar.

Somewhat alarmed he entered, and then paused in the gloom. He knew there was a chance that Mike Mulloy might mistake him for an enemy and use his revolvers, so he called the Irishman's name.

A voice answered him, but one so faint and husky that he became alarmed and struck a match.

By its light he saw a startling scene. He saw overturned chairs and signs of confusion everywhere; and on the floor Mrs. Danton lay bound and gagged, though the gag had partially slipped from her mouth.

Quickly Ben released her.

"Where are ther rest?" he asked.

"They have been here again and stolen Lillian," the mother moaned, "and there was a terrible fight."

"Who was they?"

"The leader was Moses Chick."

"Cuss ther scoundrel; he shall sweat for this. But ther boyee—Mike Mulloy—what of him?"

"He was struck to the floor, but arising just as they went out with Lillian, he pursued, and I have not seen him since."

"Holy Moses! they shall smell brimstone fur this. Ther Arizon Thunderer will be on their trail in a minute, an' when he snorts with anger he raises a cloud. Come, Shirley; come, Buck; thar is work fur us ter do!"

When his enemies had gone, Boss Cole went back to the Pilgrim's Rest in a surly mood. His plans were failing one after another, and he seemed likely to soon lose his grip on Keno Camp, but he hoped a good deal from the messenger he had sent to Bumblebee.

Maggie Perkins, though outwardly only a casual acquaintance, was devoted to him and his interests.

While thus engaged in reflection, he was aroused by the arrival of Mose Chick. The coming of the fellow interested Cole, for it will be remembered he had been missing for an hour or two, and the mine-owner suspected he had been busy.

"Hallo, old man," the bully familiarly said.

"Hallo, Chick. You have been away, haven't you?"

"I've be'n doin' my level best fur No. 1," was the reply, as Chicken Mose took a seat. "Guess what, boss?"

"I give it up."

"Waal, I've be'n over ter Danton's, an' stole ther gal."

Cole grew suddenly interested.

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes."

Cole's first emotion was one of joy, but as he reflected on the ways of the bully of Keno, he felt less

pleasure. Chicken Mose never went to mill unless he had a grist to grind.

"What was your object?" he slowly asked.

"To be mayor of Keno."

"How does that help you?"

"I ain't blind, Lem, nor deaf, either, an' I know a good deal o' ther unpleasantness in this yer camp has been indirectly caused by that same gal. You want her an' you want ther mine she owns, while ef you can't hev it you intend ter throw ther whole bus'ness ter Caspo Latham. Then Blizzard Ben has in some way tumbled to ther game, so he stands as ther gal's champion. So you see ther is quite a *furore* over her, an' in ther midst on it I siips in an' takes ther gal, an' holdin' her as I shall, I can say ter you an' to Blizzard Ben, 'Make me mayor o' Keno, an' ther gal is yours; otherwise, not.' Strikes me I hold ther drop."

Chick leaned nonchalantly back in his chair, but Cole scowled ominously.

"Blizzard Ben will not treat with you," he said.

"How do you know?"

"You had a taste of his way when he got at you in the crowd. When he has anything to do, he goes in with a dash, and just so he will to rescue Lillian, if, as you think, he is interested in her."

"I'll blow his brains out ef he molests me."

"I know your leaning that way, Chick, but Ben Thunderer, or whatever his name is, has the same weakness. Look at what he has done since he came to Keno. One after another he has met and worsted Dave Connors, Dunn, you and myself, besides some minor lights."

"Bah! don't talk that way. Ther cuss is big an' strong, more so than I am, but I ain't afeerd on him. But, Cole, tell me what you will do fur me? You want Lillian Danton. What is she worth to you?"

"In money?"

The eyes of the two met. Villains both, they had axes to grind, and they knew not how far they could go.

"Wal," said Chick, slowly, "ef I give her up to you, I also give up my chance o' bein' mayor. That ought ter bring me plenty o' money."

"I offered to make you sheriff."

"Bah! you can't put that shirt on my back. See hyer, pard, give me a thousand dollars in clean money an' ther gal is yours, while on ther morrer I'll throw every vote I kin muster for you."

Chick was plainly in earnest, and it was a chance the mine-owner could not afford to lose. He promptly closed with the proposition, and, after some further conversation, offered to at once take charge of the prisoner and pay the thousand dollars.

Of course there would be war in Arnold's camp when the deed was known, but with seventy-five men at his back, and more likely to soon arrive from Bumblebee, Boss Cole seemed to hold the winning cards.

Matters thus settled, the pair of villains started for the cabin where Chick had left Lillian.

CHAPTER XIV.

MIKE MULLOY ON DECK.

WHEN Mike Mulloy appointed himself guardian of the Danton cottage, he meant to do his duty like a man, and that is why he sat down in the kitchen instead of going to bed or joining the men outside.

Evidently he was a great favorite with the ladies, for they, too, remained awake and conversed with him.

When Chicken Mose made his attack, it had come so suddenly, that Mike was pounced upon before he suspected any mischief; and while he was held firmly, the ruffians proceeded to bind Mrs. Danton and carry off her daughter.

Their work done there, Chick gave Mike a blow on the head which seemed to stun him; but they had scarcely passed through the door when he sprung up and followed.

Not far away he saw them, with Lillian in their midst, and, as he was still dizzy from his rough usage, he sprung forward with a recklessness he would not usually have shown.

He immediately paid the penalty of that recklessness, for one of the men turned as he attacked them, and struck a blow with his revolver which again sent Mike down, this time to stay, for his senses took a gallop away from him.

How long he lay there he could not tell; but consciousness at last returned, and he sat upright and ran his hand along the top of his head.

"Bedad!" he muttered, "an' it's a foine ache I have on the top av me head. Howly Mither, phat has happened to me at all, I dunno. I feel as though I had been buttin' me head ag'in' a stone wall; but by the same token there are no stone walls visible. Hev I fallen from dher top av a kenyon an' bu'sted me pate, or phat dher devil is dher matter?"

He soon remembered and then leaped to his feet. Mrs. Danton had been assaulted and bound, Lillian had been carried away prisoner, and the bunch on his head was such as a revolver might have raised.

The young fellow was pluck to the backbone and he at once expanded into a warrior. The wolf had come down on the fold he had undertaken to guard, and if he did not make it bad weather for that crowd he was no prophet.

He was about to return to the cabin and look first after Mrs. Danton, but at that moment he caught sight of two men not far away who looked like his late assailants and he dashed away in pursuit.

If such they were he was never able to prove it; in fact, he gave up the idea when he overtook them and saw their faces. He paused without saying a word and stood for a moment in deep thought.

At the other end of the straggling village, Cole's house was still burning, and the shouts from that direction indicated that something of interest was transpiring.

Mike was on the point of going there to seek the aid of Blizzard Ben when a man came out of a cabin near at hand and strode away toward the fire. This man was Mose Chick, and Mike recognized him as one of his late assailants.

"By dher howly piper!" muttered the youth, "its mesilf dhat belaves I am on dher thrack. This was Misther Chick doin' in dhat cabin ef it ain't there he has caged his prisoner? I'll bate he has lift her dhere wid a guard, an' now dher crayther is goin' over to see dher fun. It's a fool I am ef I don't have me share av dher fun while he's gone."

He walked around to the front of the cabin and saw a gleam of light from under the door. Down on his knees he went and tried to get a look within, but the crevice proved to be too small. He listened, but nothing was to be heard.

"I thry dher windy. I don't want ter play dher burglar, but ef Lee Danton's sister is in dher ranch it's mesilf that won't rist until she is out."

To the window he went, but a curtain on the inside obstructed his view and he was none the wiser.

"Devil fly away wid yez," he said, shaking his fist. "Will yez bar out an honest lad whin he manes well ter dher cause av dher roight? I'm a straight descendant av dher O'Connors av ould Ireland, an' dher blood in me veins is all blue. Now, how shall I get at dher cabin? If I knock at dher door I shall probably find dhat only a secret tap will open it, an' ef I rouse up dher devils inside they may chop open me head. Phat shall I do?"

He stood and reflected for some time, but ideas were not plenty and he was about to leave and go in search of Blizzard Ben when he perceived that the window above his head was put in after a clumsy fashion and fitted on the outside to prevent it being blown in.

In a minute more he was hold of the sash, and after a little labor he succeeded in removing it entirely, and that, too, without creating any disturbance.

Only the curtain remained between him and a view of the interior, and, raising himself to a level with the small opening, he prepared to see what was inside the den.

Brushing aside the curtain, he saw all.

A small room with half a dozen wooden stools, a table and some minor articles of furniture; a light on the table; and in the room three persons.

The first of these was Lillian Danton, the others a pair of roughs well known in Keno Camp. Where Chicken Mose led they followed, and as he never led to an honorable object, little can be said in their favor.

Lillian sat a little apart from them, somewhat pale but perfectly calm; while they, with their ruling passion strong as ever, had produced a pack of cards and were already playing at the rough table.

Mike Mulloy saw all this and wondered what he was to do next. If he had had a pair of revolvers he would have torn down the curtain and covered them both, but not a weapon was in his belt.

The door being fastened on the inside, he could not make use of that, so his only hope seemed to lie in attracting the attention of Lillian.

This he endeavored to do, but, never suspecting that the little window could in any way interest her, she did not once look that way.

Mike reflected and finally prepared for a bold venture.

Dropping to the ground he searched in the darkness until he found a stone the size of his hat-crown and then went back to his old position.

He was about to try a game which seemed to have nearly all the chances against it, but many a time had he succeeded by just as simple a trick as this.

He pushed the curtain aside without attracting the attention of any one, and then swung the rock back over his shoulder. He meant to cast it inside the cabin and the lamp was his target. If he missed he had only to drop and run; if he succeeded he was going inside to take a hand in a first-class fight-as you-please.

With a steady hand he hurled the stone and his aim could not have been better. It struck the table with a crash, beating down the lamp in its progress and plunging the room into total darkness, and it brought the card-players to their feet with mutual oaths.

They knew not what to make of the situation, but some further light was soon given them.

No sooner did Mike Mulloy see that he had dashed out the light than he went through the window like an eel, striking on his feet and being all ready for further operations.

An instant later one of the ruffians received a blow near his temple which knocked him clean off his pins, and as he went he struck against his pard, who had stooped to pick up the lamp from the floor, and both went crashing down together.

Mike Mulloy had begun his work like a battering-ram, and he was about to make a try for the weapons of the man he had sent to grass when the door opened and a gleam from the burning house fell upon a female form.

Lillian was improving the chance to escape from the cabin.

In a moment more Mike was by her side and his voice reassured the fears he had awakened by grasping her arm.

"It's mesilf it is, darlint," he said, "an' we kin escape ef we make our feet fly away wid us, though it's little toime we have fur foolin'."

They had darted around the corner of the cabin and were speeding away to safety, caring little for the oaths still arising from the cabin.

"You are always around to help me when you are needed, you darling," said Miss Danton, warmly.

"An' where should I be in sich cases? Didn't your brither Lee, an' mesilf, nearly drownd in Black Kenyon a year or more ago? Shure, I loved ther

mon from that day, an' it's me life I wu'd risk fur his purty sister. But here we are at your own cabin, an' me life, hyer is Blizzard Ben a-lookin' as wild as though we had rin away. Did ye think ther fat was in the fire, ould man, whin yez found us gone?"

Sure enough, the fugitives had run straight upon Ben and his friends at the moment they emerged from the Danton cabin to go in search of Lillian.

There was a joyful reunion and the girl was eloquent in her praises of Mike, but he made light of the whole affair and his boyish face was as unconcerned as though Keno camp was the most law-abiding place in the world.

While they sat there, Boss Cole and Chick were nearing the cabin where the latter had left his captive. They had come to an amicable agreement, and for a thousand dollars the Keno bully was to give up the girl and on the next day so throw the votes under his control that Lemuel Cole would go in as mayor on the run.

Consequently, they approached the cabin in pleasant conversation, but Chicken Mose suddenly paused. The door was wide open and all was dark within.

With an oath, Chick crossed the threshold and called the names of the men he had left as jailers. No answer was returned and he hurriedly struck a match, to find the cabin empty.

For a time profanity and perplexity ruled the hour, but when they saw the open window, the overturned table and the rock Mike Mulloy had thrown, they could not doubt but that Lillian's friends had come to her rescue.

But where were the guards?

They asked the question in vain, but in point of fact, two brawny men were at that moment making tracks in the direction of Bumblebee. Big as they were, they had no desire to face Chick in the heat of his anger.

His anger was at a white heat and so was that of Boss Cole; but they cooled off after a while and began to lay plans for the future. Anon, they could look after Lillian again and wipe out a few of her leading supporters, but if the rival faction would hold off until the coming election, the combined menagerie would also keep the peace.

The two men had a frank talk. Cole wanted very much to be mayor, unruly as was the flock to be governed, while Chick was beginning to think he would rather have money than fame.

Consequently, after due consultation, the bravo agreed to withdraw and throw his influence for his ally, in consideration of the payment of one hundred dollars cash and an extra five hundred when the work was done.

They shook hands on this compact and separated in better humor.

CHAPTER XV.

A MAYOR AT LAST—A WILD RIDE.

THE following day dawned brightly, but it was late when Keno Camp aroused. The last half of the night had passed so pleasantly that such of the men as had ventured to sleep were reluctant to bestir themselves again; but they finally came out, and, excepting for the ruins of Cole's house, the embryo city looked as usual.

The rising sun sent its beams down on the Danton cabin and found the place secure and quiet. After the reunion, Blizzard Ben and Shirley had gone to sleep within eyesight of Mike Mulloy, who had watched through all, and the hostile faction would not have fared well if they had made further demonstrations.

Mrs. Danton and Lillian prepared a good breakfast for their champions, and then Ben and Shirley went out to join their comrades. Election or no election, Mike would not again leave the cabin, nor was he likely to be again caught napping.

At an early hour Cole sent a note to Buck Arnold asking if he would be ready for voting at ten o'clock, and, the reply being in the affirmative, the miners began to gather shortly before that hour.

With the fickleness of their natures, they seemed to have banished all signs of resentment, and the men who had the previous night fingered revolvers as they scowled into each other's faces now chatted and imbibed the Pilgrim's Rest whisky together in a friendly manner.

The Arnold wing was calmly confident, knowing that they had almost one-half of all the citizens under their banner, and not knowing that Chick had sold out to Cole.

The latter was the only really happy man in the city. His money had done what nothing else could, and he was sure of seventy-two votes against the forty-nine pledged to Arnold—for the latter force was reduced one vote by the absence of Earl Chester, even as revolver exercise had cleaned out some of the allies' best men.

Preparations for the grand event went serenely on. The same ballot-box was mounted on a barrel, but no speeches were made. Peace and good-will seemed to rule the hour; not even Blizzard Ben had a growl to disturb the picnic.

Voting began by Shirley casting a ballot for Buck Arnold, and then, one after the other, the whole population deposited their paper voices, not excepting Arnold and Cole. The Western candidate who isn't man enough to back himself at the polls is a scarce individual.

This part over, the counting serenely began. Such of the backers of Arnold as had a hand in this part were surprised as the work went on to find that Chick had not a vote. All were for Buck or Cole.

At last the slips of paper lay in two piles, side by side, and it only remained to see which had raked the stakes.

Cole's face grew anxious. Perhaps his eyes deceived him, but the second pile looked larger than his own. Could it be—

The counting went on steadily.

One hundred and twenty-one votes had been cast. Of these, Buck Arnold had sixty-seven and Lemuel Cole but fifty-four!

When Shirley announced the grand result a momentary silence followed, and then came a glad hurrah from the little band who had helped to make Arnold the first mayor of Keno.

"That's right," cried Blizzard Ben; "now give three-times-three for Mayor Arnold!"

The cheers rang out, and even some of Cole's men joined in the shout, but the mine-owner himself sat with a white, furious face and stared at the ballots so fatal to his hopes. In some way he had been outwitted, deceived, duped—but how?

"It is false!" he suddenly cried. "There is some mistake, for I had seventy-two men pledged to vote for me."

"I reckon they changed their minds," said Shirley, dryly.

"Bet your life they did," said a rough voice; and Moses Chick pushed to the front where all could see him. "Yes, they changed their minds," he added, scowling at Cole.

"You treacherous dog!" shouted the mad mine-owner, "I owe this to you."

"Yes, so you do. You owe et all ter me."

"You deceived me, you treacherous hound."

"Fa'r names, Lem, fa'r names," warned the bully.

"I'll give you what you deserve," Cole snarled, and out from his belt came his revolver.

Before it was at a level the weapon of Chicken Mose covered his heart.

"Hold up!" he ordered, sharply. "Try ter raise it or ter pull ther trigger an' you are a dead man."

Cole paused, for he was not fool enough to buck against the Keno bully with the drop dead against him, but his eyes flashed ominously.

"I know your skill with the revolver," he sullenly said, "but I don't allow any man to play such a trick on me with impunity."

"Choka et off afore it hurts you," answered Chick, fingering his weapons restlessly. "Don't talk ter me o' treachery. What hay yer done yerself? You come ter me an' offered me money ter withdraw an' throw my votes fur you. I agreed, all in good faith, but what did you do? You went ter Tom Bennett, 'cause you knowed he an' I had a fracas t'other day, an' offered him a hundr'd dollars ef he would renew ther quarrel with me an' shoot me dead. Oh! that was good faith on your part, warn't it? You was afraid I would be a leech ter drawr blood an' money from you when you was mayor, eh? You made a bull thar, Boss Cole, an' you made another when you tried ter hire Tom. He's give ther racket dead away."

Every one listened in dead silence to this long and bitter accusation, and Lemuel Cole fairly writhed under it. He was guilty—he had believed Chick would blackmail him regularly if left alive, and he had offered Bennett money to shoot the bully at some time directly after the voting.

He ground out a bitter curse but said nothing.

"Havin' got on to your leetle game, I took ther ribbons in my own hands," continued Chick. "Ther votes I controlled was throwed, not fur you, but fur Buck Arnold, an' you are beat by your own rascality."

Cole could bear no more. Glances of scorn were showered on him from every side; these rough miners, wicked though they might be to a certain degree, despised such low treachery as his had been.

Seeing all this, he did what he would never have done if not judgment-blinded by rage.

He snatched a revolver from his belt and tried to draw a bead on the bully, but when the weapon was half-way up one of Chick's own revolvers flashed and Cole staggered and then went down in a heap.

One man had anticipated the shot. Lodestone Dave, ever faithful to his employer, had worked around near Chick, but the tragedy had come so quickly that he had no time to prevent it. His keen bowie was in his hands, however, and as Cole fell he lunged out straight and hard and the blood spurted over his hands as the blade found a sheath in human flesh.

Chick reeled back from the stroke, swung partially around, cocked one of his revolvers while his eyes blazed with fury; but with his finger on the trigger threw up his hands and went down in a heap.

The bully of Keno had played his last trump.

There was less confusion than might have been expected. Chick's body was borne away, and at the same time Lodestone Dave and his friends were carrying Cole inside the Pilgrim's Rest. According to border law, Dave had been justified in his act of vengeance and no one openly spoke against him.

Cole had an ugly wound in his side, but with a good constitution it seemed likely that he would be out in a few days, and as Connors dressed the wound he spoke the thoughts of his dark and scheming mind.

"I am whipped this time, but if I can't rule Keno I will ruin it. Dave, send a man to Captain Bison and tell him to come to the city with his road-agents and make war on the powers that be. That shall be the price of the service I have agreed to do for him, and with Arnold, Blizzard Ben and a few others dead I will yet be mayor of Keno."

When the voting took place, one man of the original Arnold fifty was not at the polls. This man was Earl Chester, who had rode away to overtake Maggie Perkins on her mission to Bumblebee.

Mounted on Black Jack, the man from Santa Barbara left Keno at a gallop. Before leaving he had

stained the white marks on the horse, and once outside the city he quietly turned a reversible coat he wore and then adjusted a mask over his face.

This done, only a keen scrutiny could have distinguished him as the Earl Chester of Keno, and he hoped that if he overtook the girl his work might be done without betraying his identity.

He had made no vain boast when he spoke of the speed of Black Jack. The gallant animal was eager for the run, and as he went forward it was evident that but few horses in Arizona could match him.

Earl did little urging. He had given Jack the hint that great things were expected of him, and as they swept forward he sat easily in the saddle and let the horse work to suit himself.

The twenty-five miles to be passed before Bumblebee was reached was in part a wild road. For four miles the trail was at the base of the hills with many places where a galloping steed would sink to the fetlocks in sand, but at the end of that distance the ground ascended sharply, and for ten miles a rider must go through canyons, where bold cliffs and ragged peaks arose around him.

As Earl entered this region he began to look more sharply about him, for in the hills the road-agents of Captain Bison had their home and they were rather "keerless" in their way of handling six-shooters.

If he fell into their hands, all hope of staying the girl-messenger would be gone.

Danger had too often been his companion for him to falter now, and without a slackening of speed he went forward at the old gallop. Black Jack's hoofs rung sharply on the hard soil and harder rocks, and the echoes of the canyons made it seem as though an army was en route, but still the lone rider went on tirelessly.

Five miles had been passed, and though Maggie might be far away, he began to look for her at each turn in the well-defined road. At the pace he had come, an ordinary horse would already have been ridden down.

It was well for Earl that the trail was so unmistakable, for, otherwise, he might have lost his way in the darkness. On the plain, the night would have been called tolerably light, but in the sheer canyons the shadows fell deep and heavy.

Although the dweller in the West soon grows accustomed to such wild mountain scenes, the stranger is always deeply impressed at first, for in the towering maw of the cliffs he seems like one in a tunnel, with only the narrow belt of sky overhead to break the illusion.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTAIN BISON SWEEPS THE BOARD.

Four miles further the gallant black horse went at his tireless pace. Earl was more than one-third of the distance toward Bumblebee and half-way through the hills, but as yet he had seen no signs of Maggie Perkins.

His watchfulness had increased as he went on. He was in the heart of the mountains, in the heart of the land where Captain Bison collected toll; and across the rider's lap lay a cocked revolver.

The road-robbers must fight for what they got if they took him.

Around a bend at the foot of a canyon he went at a gallop. Right there, where the ground sloped down in all directions, previous rains had washed a quantity of sand. When Black Jack struck this deposit he went as silently as a steed of air, and thus it was that the clatter of hoofs from in advance was borne to Earl's ears.

The sound electrified him. Bending low in his saddle, he strained his eyes and could plainly see a single rider going up the ascent beyond.

"The woman, I'll bet my life!" he muttered. "Now, Jack, old boy, forward and end it all."

Gallantly the black horse sprung forward. He shot up the ascent like an arrow; so rapidly, in fact, that the pursued seemed to stand still.

Seemed to stand still.

Earl grew surprised and wavering a little as he saw at last that the other rider had indeed halted and was calmly waiting for him to come up, but the sight of female apparel reassured him and he rode on steadily, nor was he long in seeing that it was indeed Maggie Perkins.

She sat on the "tenderfoot's" horse, looking at him without apparent emotion.

"Halt, mountain brave," she said, as he came up, and he wondered at her pleasant tone. "Why do you ride so late?"

"It is a question which will apply equally well to yourself," he retorted, pulling up at her side.

"The hawk flies low when the fog hangs heavy."

"That's about the size of it," he said, wondering what she meant by such jargon.

"The eagle builds his nest in the frowning crag," she went on, looking at him keenly.

"Shows his good sense," muttered Earl, in bewilderment.

"The brooding thrush pipes loud at morn," continued this remarkable Miss Perkins, but she seemed growing uneasy.

"You speak solid truth, marm," said Earl, rallying, "but your English lays me clean over. I don't get the diameter of what you say for a cent. Still, it ain't my way to spoil a picnic when refreshments are free, so I'll chip in as far as my abilities go. How's this?

"This nigger's heart is full of glee, And the bullfrog sings in the hollow tree."

"I don't claim that to be poetry, for you observe it is lamentably lame in its feet, but in point of rhyme it is 'way up. Some of Doctor Watts's verses might be worked in right here with good effect, if the brooding thrush and the rest of the family don't object."

"You are not a mountain brave!" flashed the girl, and her hand dropped toward her revolver, but he held up his own thirty-two caliber quickly.

"Don't try to shoot, marm," he coolly said. "There's no occasion for it, and you might get yourself in a sled. Keep your hands from the cold iron and we may be friends, mountain braves or otherwise."

"Who are you?" she demanded, harshly; and he saw that he had no creature of clay to combat.

"I'm Albuquerque Abe, the cinnamon crocodile of the Cheyenne reservation," he blandly explained, "and I'm an electric battery on the shoot. I'm a licensed road-agent out on a raise, and if you have dust or iron ore in your vest pocket, you will please disburse before the brooding thrush or the eagle of the frowning crag lips in to our sociable."

"Fool!" she snapped. "What do mean?"

"I mean that I want the contents of your pockets," he retorted, dropping his exaggerated manner.

"Are you a robber?"

"I am."

"I have no money."

"Nor I. We should pull well together in an ordinary case, but I am playing a lone hand this time. Please hand over your revolvers now. Pass them along with the muzzle in the rear. They are unreliable things, you know."

The girl had been sitting perfectly still, her hand well up, but as he spoke one little hand crept to her mouth and then a shrill whistle filled the canyon and awoke varied echoes.

Earl started forward quickly. That whistle was not the unmeaning act of a weak woman—it had a deeper meaning. He sprung forward and caught her arm.

"Woman, what would you do?" he demanded.

"I would like to whistle," she said, and her brazen air was not to be mistaken.

"Was that a signal to Captain Bison?"

"Perhaps. Look around you."

Earl obeyed, and as he looked, saw himself hemmed in on all sides by masked horsemen. He estimated their number at one glance, and silently gave up the idea of fighting.

"Hands up!" cried a stern voice.

"There she blows," coolly answered the man from Santa Barbara, and high above his head went his fives.

One of the men rode forward.

"You are sensible," he observed.

"I'm no hog," said Earl, "and I won't take any advantage of you by reason of my preponderance of numbers."

"Shall I take your weapons?"

"If you please. They are loaded."

The unknown disarmed Earl, and then good-humoredly said:

"You can drop your hands. Do you know me?"

"Can't say I do."

"I'm Captain Bison."

"I'm Corporal Coyote, from the Colorado Canyon. Glad to see you, Cap. Will you shake?"

The road-agent mechanically took the hand extended to him.

"Well, by Jove, you're a cool cuss," he muttered.

"Oh! I believe in making myself at home. Ain't you going to take me into your den?"

"I will, by Jove," said Bison; "but if you think you can get any points on me you are mistaken. I will blindfold you and take you in, after which I want the pedigree of such a cool villain as you are. If you pan out well to the square inch, I'm not the man to buck against you; but if you are bad medicine I'll read it in your eyes, and then give you to the buzzards for steak. You come here in a bad way, but I rather cotton to your style of talk, and I'll give you a clean bill of health if I can."

By the time he was through speaking, his men had bandaged Earl's eyes. The latter had no thought of resistance just then. He had heard of Captain Bison, and knew that, although not wedded to the vice of shooting, he was a dead shot when he sprung the hammer, and would show no mercy to a man who bucked against him.

Right there Earl gave up all thoughts of stopping Maggie Perkins from reaching Bumblebee, but his mind was recalled to the matter when, during a pause, he heard her talking with Captain Bison in a subdued voice.

A little later the outlaw came back to his side, grasped Black Jack by the rein, and then the party wound around in perplexing turns and curves for half an hour.

Finally Earl was told to dismount, and then he was led forward over a rocky floor for some time, but just as a glimmer of light through his muffler told that they had arrived somewhere, the muffler was cast off, and he found himself in a small rock room, dimly lighted by a torch, with Bison and Maggie for his companions.

"Sit down," said the road-agent, indicating a chair. "We seldom entertain guests here, but you deserve some favor. So do I. Will you take off your mask?"

"I will, though you seem inclined to keep yours on. That part is immaterial to me, however, for I don't care a straw what is behind it. Off comes mine!"

He suited the action to the word, and then followed a little cry as Maggie saw his face. He smiled grimly, knowing she had recognized him, though his future looked a little cloudy.

Bison, too, heard the cry, and he looked sharply at Maggie. She answered the inquiring look by saying:

"This is the man of whom I tried in vain to obtain a horse at Keno Camp."

She had spoken in Spanish, but it might as well

have been in English. The liquid tongue was no stranger to Chester.

"I am the man, Miss Maggie," he acknowledged; "but I hope you won't bear me any ill will for my refusal. I love my black steed like a brother, and would not willingly part from him."

"You assaulted this lady in the canyon," Bison sternly said.

"Not seriously, captain."

"What was your object?"

Earl hesitated for a moment, and then resolved to make a clean breast of the whole business. He told of the letter from Cole to the bravos at Bumblebee and why they wished to stop it, and Bison heard in silence. At the end he turned to Maggie.

"Pass the letter to this man," he quietly said.

She obeyed, but Earl looked at the outlaw instead of the letter.

"Read," was the terse direction.

Earl did as he was told, wondering what was to follow.

"Is that the genuine article?"

"I see no reason to doubt it," he answered.

"Then take it to the torch and burn it with your own hands."

Considerably surprised, Earl hastened to obey, and when the note had blackened to ashes, resumed his seat, at the outlaw's sign.

"Chester," Bison then said, "you look surprised. There is no occasion for it. I know Boss Cole well, and he and I have had our fingers in many a pie together, but I am tired of the old hypocrite and am going to slide off on a new sluice. It will upset a nice little plan he has in view, for he was about to bring me forward as claimant for a mine in Keno. I made one appearance there a fortnight ago and called myself Caspo Latham, the object being to deprive a widow and her daughter of their legal rights, but the size of the stake savored too much of villainy for Captain Bison, and I am out of the game. When I fight, it's on the square."

"I, too, am done with Lemuel Cole," said Maggie. "I have worked well for him, but my brother urges me to forsake his cause, and I obey."

"Your brother?"

"I'm that pilgrim," said the outlaw. "Well, pard, I don't see as we need to quarrel, so I will just shut you up in a cosey cell until I do a bit of business on the trail, after which, unless my mood changes a good bit, you shall go your way rejoicing to Keno. When you reach there, call on Lillian Danton and her mother, and tell them Caspo Latham is out of the race."

CHAPTER XVII.

MAGGIE SEEKS A PARD, AND DUNN GETS LEFT.

EARL CHESTER had been in his really comfortable dungeon for what seemed a full day, but it was really only a little past noon when Captain Bison's sister came past the guard.

She had made herself up regardless of expense, and the prisoner could not help admitting that she was a very fine-looking young woman.

He arose politely, and she came forward with a smile and gave him her shapely hand frankly.

"Are you dead from dullness, Mr. Chester?" she asked.

"Life is not yet extinct, and a faint throbbing of my heart is perceptible. With due care and a stomach-pump I think I shall pull through yet."

It was not a speech which would have done him credit in the fashionable society of the East, but Maggie smiled as though she considered him quite witty.

"We intended to release you some hours ago, but Captain Bison has not yet returned. I thought I would come in and assure you that, though outlaws, we shall keep our pledge."

"I have never doubted it, miss; but, though confident before, I thank you all the same for calling. Time has hung a bit heavily on my hands, and your face is like light in my cell."

"Now you flatter me."

"I only say what is true, Miss Bison. I am enough of a human to admire a pretty girl—but I'll let up, miss, for you will think I am talking to make my release a certainty. Any news from Keno Camp since we left?"

"None whatever."

"I am anxious to know the result of matters."

"No one can regret more than I that you should be kept from your post at such a crisis, but were it not for that I should enjoy showing you something of the wild, free life we lead."

"I have roughed it a little myself in my day, though not as a rider of the road."

"Doubtless you condemn the life we have chosen."

"I look at it philosophically—it's all in the way of business, you know."

"Captain Bison would be glad to see you one of his band," she abruptly said.

"Sorry to disappoint him, but I am on a trail of vengeance, just at present."

"Join us, and we will make your quarrel ours."

"I am afraid I would make a poor agent. You saw a sample of my skill in the canyon."

Maggie smiled faintly.

"I thought you one of our band, then, and the vague words I spoke were our private signals. Did you think me insane?"

"I thought you were going to act the role to baffle me," Earl answered, laughing as he remembered their conversation.

Conversing pleasantly, an hour passed away. Miss Maggie, however, had come to the den with a settled purpose, and after the fashion of the region—a fashion she was not timid enough to soften—she came bluntly to the point after favoring Earl with her smile for a due time.

"Mr. Chester," she said, "I would be glad to see you a member of our band."

"Would you make me a lieutenant?" he asked, smiling.

"We would, indeed. Join us, and you shall be second only to Captain Bison. You shall rule over all our braves, and—and over more than them if you choose."

"What more is there?"

The color increased in her cheeks, but she steadily answered:

"It may be unmaidenly for me to speak, but you say you are a philosopher, and, consequently, will know how to meet what I say. Should you wish to join us, you may not only rule over the mountain braves, but over Captain Bison's sister."

It would out at last, and as Earl sat before this strange girl who spoke in so business-like a way, despite her faint blushing, he knew she had offered him her hand and heart.

Men who have experimented in that line know that it is a delicate matter to refuse a woman's love, especially when she holds the drop; but the man from Santa Barbara, not craving the honor tendered him, rallied his fighting force, and did the work so scientifically that not a trace of resentment was perceptible in Maggie's fair face.

Disappointment and chagrin were in her heart; but, remembering that Chester would be near her while he remained at Keno Camp, she vowed that the end was not yet, and resolved to win him in some way or other.

So she hid all her emotions, except a becoming sadness, and, assuring him that all should be well with him, finally took her leave, and left him to commune with his own thoughts.

It was not a very pleasant occupation, for he had become so interested in the cause he had espoused at Keno Camp, that he was anxious to be there and aid the reform element in their labors; but he accepted the inevitable with philosophy, and lost no flesh by worrying.

Somewhat later another visitor passed the guard, and Captain Bison came in masked as before.

"I owe you an apology, Chester," he said, in a friendly way. "I hoped to have sent you home before now, but I have had a fight with a gang that is trying to root me out of my lair. There has been fighting, and there will be more, and I fear my days in David Pass are about over. Consequently, I will start you for home before it is too late."

"I am all ready," Earl promptly answered.

"Then we will bandage your eyes and lead you out. Your own horse awaits you in a pass near at hand."

Blindfolded, Earl was led along a crooked way for some time, and then his conductors paused and cast off the bandage.

They were in a narrow pass, where all was strange to him, and Bison and two men were at his side; but though he expected to see Maggie, she was invisible.

"Follow this pass straight down, and it will lead you to the road from Bumblebee to Keno," Bison said. "If you are questioned, you are at liberty to tell all you know."

The generosity of the outlaw touched Chester, and he thanked him warmly. If he could have read the hidden face and heart, he would have known that all this kindness was the offspring of a firm resolve to make him a lieutenant of the "Mountain Braves."

Bison read his boldness and mettle. Maggie was infatuated over his handsome face, and only good usage and time could accomplish their end.

They were about to separate when a man was seen riding up the pass at a gallop. He came nearer and proved to be Dunn, the red-nosed man we have before seen.

He greeted Bison cordially and then stopped short at sight of Earl.

"Spit it out," said the agent, bluntly. "This man is a prisoner and will be food for the crows in five minutes."

"There is trouble at Keno Camp," said Dunn. "The ruffian element that he elected Buck Arnold mayor, an' Boss Cole has a lead pill in his stomach."

"Dead?"

"No; only slightly hurt. His enemies hold the drop, though, an' he has sent me ter ask you ter come with your mountain braves an' wipe out his enemies."

"He is a scurvy rascal," snapped the outlaw, "and you are another. I am a villain but I fight fair, while you and Cole twist snake-like and bite men in the back. When David Pass lies level on the plain I will go to Cole's help and not before. I wash my hands of his stealthy plots. If I had time I would hang you up by the heels, but I have other business on hand. Chester, you have heard this man's message?"

"Yes."

"Well, I want you to ride back to Keno with him and tell the people there just the kind of a king-pin he is. You know him as an ally of Captain Bison, and now he has planned to destroy the city since he can not rule. Turn face, you homely mule, and ride for Keno. Don't follow your nose, for I see some one has plastered it on your left cheek. Chester, follow him, and if he tries any tricks, drop him as you would an Apache."

Dunn began to swear, but up went Bison's revolver and he ceased with commendable promptness.

Once more the outlaw spoke, and then Dunn turned toward Keno. Bison wrung Earl's hand warmly, and then the man from Santa Barbara followed the discomfited envoy.

In this manner they rode to Keno. Murder was in the heart of the red-nosed man, but he dared not buck against Earl. Once the latter addressed him,

but the fellow was sullen and they went on in silence.

Darkness fell before they reached Keno, but no mishap occurred. Near the edge of the city they came upon three men who were filling what seemed to be a grave.

"Yas, that are it," one of them said, in answer to Earl. "Under this sand lies all that was mortal of Moses Chick, an' Keno has lost her leadin' citizen. There are fond hearts that'll miss him, but we kin only give him a square plant an' a monument now. We will put up a tablet relatin' his virtues, tellin' how he was a patriot and scholar an' might hev be'n mayor. It's a sad day, but our loss is his gain. He was a six-in-hand an' a silver door-plate on ther dasher!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

LODESTONE DAVE TAKES THE RIBBONS.

THE remainder of the day of election passed peacefully at Keno Camp. Buck Arnold and his supporters were quietly doing what little business was necessary, but it was deemed prudent to go light for awhile until the various factions fell into line.

They did not want any more bloodshed at Keno. And the prospect of further trouble seemed drifting away. A legal mayor was elected, Moses Chick had finished his career, and Lemuel Cole had received a sample of border vengeance.

It was to be hoped that municipal wheels would thereafter roll evenly.

Blizzard Ben announced that he and Shirley would go away together in a few days. The latter had business elsewhere, and as the two had taken a fancy to each other, despite the vast difference in their natures, they would take hold of the drag-ropes together.

Matters were quiet about the Danton cabin. Mike Mulloy kept indoors most of the time and entertained Ben and their other callers; in fact, he made himself so much at home that some of the miners began to wonder if he did not aspire to marry Lillian and scoop in the Danton mine.

Despite the placid surface, the girl herself did not feel at ease. She could not get rid of the impression that the ex-boss would yet show his fangs again, and with his money to back him he could lay wires in deep water when he tried.

The reader knows how true her opinion was. Baffled in his ambition, Cole had resolved to ruin or recover Keno Camp, and not for a moment did he doubt but that Dunn would bring Captain Bison and his mountain braves to inaugurate a reign of terror for the Arnoldites.

His wound was found to be less serious than had at first been supposed. His friends told him he would be out in two or three days, but had circumstances demanded, the plucky mine-owner would then and there have arisen from his bed.

In this crisis, it was natural that Dave Connors should come to the front. He had been the right-hand man of the ex-boss and had a large personal following, and with the leader on his back, the defeated faction looked to him for guidance.

Lodestone Dave was in a fury, and all his wrath was directed against Blizzard Ben. He had known and hated the man of old, and now that his efforts had wrecked the ship of state at Keno, the old wound was breaking out with increased venom.

With Cole as mayor, Dave would have been the second man in the king-row; as it was, he fell far short of his ambition. Consequently, he resolved to seek revenge on the Thunderer.

That night, unless their plans miscarried, Captain Bison would come with his agents, and then woe to the men who did not enroll their names under the banner of the true faith.

Just then Connors did not care to show himself outside the Pilgrim's Rest. His hand had sent Chicken Mose out of the world, and it was possible that some of his friends might see fit to avenge the blow. That tragedy had divided the menagerie against itself, and only through Captain Bison could the Cole faction hope to regain control.

A little before dark a man entered Keno on a galloping horse which showed signs of having been hard ridden for some miles. Straight to the Pilgrim's Rest he went, and, having inquired for Dave, he was soon in that man's presence.

"Hal!" said the overseer, "you come from Bison."

"From, but not for him. He refuses to aid you."

"The deuce he does!"

"Yes. He received your messenger with abuse and sent him back ter tell Cole that their league was over. That ain't ther wust on't. With Dunn comes another man who will give ther whole bus'ness away ter ther Arnold crowd, and ef it don't get ter be bad weather fur Cole I'm a liar."

"We will deny this man's revelation. Who is he?" Then the stranger told of the coming of Dunn and Earl Chester, who must then be within a mile of Keno. For his own part, he was named Black and had been in the pass when Bison received the red-nosed man. That day, for some offense, the outlaw chief had given him a blow; and now he had deserted and made a bold push to gain the good will of the Cole faction.

"Chester must not reach Keno alive," Lodestone Dave abruptly declared. "His news will send Cole to ther gallows sure, without a trial, an' I reckon I might keep him company. He must die on ther way. Be you with me, Black?"

"Ter ther death. I'm done with Bison."

They went out hastily and in a few moments had collected half a dozen stout fellows who were laborers in the Cole mine. Ruffians by nature and adherents of Cole by policy, they were ready for anything.

Just outside the city they ambushed themselves

in a bit of uneven ground and waited for Earl and Dunn.

While there, three men passed, carrying a body on a rude stretcher, and Connors saw that Moses Chick's friends were performing the last act of human kindness for him who had once been the bully of Keno.

Half an hour later two horsemen were seen approaching, and as they came nearer Dave easily recognized Earl and Dunn; so he gave his men the signal and they prepared for operations.

Of course it would not be safe for them to use their revolvers so near the city, nor was it policy to allow Earl to do so. If he missed them, the report might be heard and investigated.

He had come prepared for this emergency, and with seven men at his back besides Dunn—who would of course chip in when he sized the situation—there would not be a ghost of a chance for Earl.

Straight toward the ambush he came, still following the red-nosed man, and, so anxiously was he looking ahead to see if all was quiet in the village, he did not once dream of danger.

Dunn was equally thoughtful, but he was in a very vicious mood. He feared a lynch picnic to which he would be invited when Keno was reached, but Earl's revolver had guided him all the way from David Pass, and he dared not buck against so potent a six. He would wait and try to skip out after Keno was reached.

He came near the ambush, followed by Earl. Down the depression and up the ascent went the foremost man, but just then he heard a cry and turned quickly.

One glance showed Earl struggling in the hands of several men, but Dunn did not await for more. The chance of escape was open to him and, digging his spurs into his horse, he swerved to the left and sped away in a course which would take him clear of Keno.

"I'm no hog an' I know when I've got enough," he said, aloud, as he went. "This town has got ter be too hot fur me an' I'll skip out an' never stop till I reach Phenix."

Meanwhile, Earl, taken wholly by surprise, was struggling in the hands of his ambishers. Experienced borderer that he was, he was unable to get in a shot or knife-thrust at them and he was speedily bound.

Lodestone Dave held the drop.

"Take him away," he ordered, as soon as his victim was rendered helpless. "Trot along to ther furst tree an' then we will send him up a-weepin'. So you peach on ther gang an' get up ther bad blood o' Keno?" he hissing added, in Earl's ear.

"What do you mean?"

The question was coolly put, but, in spite of that, Earl had grave doubts about his being in safe company. The ambishers certainly intended to hang him, and the chances for him to kick out of the traces looked small.

"Fool! don't flatter yerself we are in the dark. We got our news straight that you were drivin' Dunn ter camp an' gettin' your mouth puckered ter tell Boss Cole's secrets, but we lined you as yer see an' you go up a-weepin'?"

"Nary weep, David, nary weep. If I hang, so be it, but I save my tears for select occasions."

By this time they had arrived under a small tree, and in a twinkling a rope was flung over a branch and all was ready for the hanging.

"Any last words ter say?" Connors asked, gloating over his victim.

"Don't know that I have," Earl tersely answered.

"If so, they shall go in ther 'Frisco papers."

The overseer was gloating over his victim; he wanted to see him suffer, even if he was too proud to beg, before the rope was tightened. A knife would have made quicker, surer work, but Lodestone Dave always did have a weakness for ropes at funerals.

Earl shook his head.

"Let the band play," he calmly said.

Connors was annoyed at his coolness and tried to think of something to say or do which would make his end more miserable. The attempt was a failure and he gave up with a sigh.

"Pull her in!" he said, waving his hand to his men.

And in a moment more Earl Chester was dangling in mid-air.

CHAPTER XIX.

A HAILSTORM OF BULLETS.

ONE moment the man from Santa Barbara dangled in the air, and then some unseen object sent Dave Connors solidly to the sand—an object which was quickly revealed as Blizzard Ben sprung into sight, and with one stroke of his bowie cut the rope.

Earl, partially caught by the Thunderer, landed on his feet, and in a twinkling the keen bowie had severed every bond.

Then Ben thrust a pair of revolvers into his hands, weapons he was fit to use, since he had not hung long enough to injure his faculties.

"Bullets er trumps, so spin 'em lively et need be," said the veteran; then, turning to the lynchers: "Now come an' see us, you lop-eared mules. Show your teeth ef you dare, an' I'll run 'em down your 'tarnal throats. I say it, an' I'm Blizzard Ben, the bad man with a bad diploma."

The lynchers scarcely needed the invitation. Lodestone Dave was on his feet and he came up foaming. One hand drew a revolver, but it was scarcely done when it went down again. Ben, wishing to mutilate but not kill, had put a bullet through his hand.

Then the fun began and both parties shot in a careless way. Lead cut the air here and there so numerously that somebody seemed likely to be

hurt; and down went two of Connors's supporters, while a third took to his heels.

"Hurrah fur Thunderer and company," shouted Ben, who, like Earl, was still unhurt. "I'm a cyclone on stilts, an' my pard is a bad man by adoption. Wake up on t'other side, an' look at us. Bimeby we'll breathe hard, an' send you a-flyin' ter Phenix."

A hoarse shout answered him, and then fresh men closed in on all sides. Dave Connors, who had just picked up his revolver with his left hand, saw them, and uttered a responsive shout.

He had recognized the toughs of Bumblebee and thought he again held the winning cards.

"Blackfoot Sam," he cried, "here is work for your gang! String up those two galoots, and Keno takes you with open arms."

A wild yell was the answer. The gang had left Bumblebee because driven out, and though Blackfoot Sam, their leader, did not recognize Connors, he was ready to do whatever would gain them footing at Keno.

Together they made a rush, and Blizzard Ben and Earl, unable to retreat, had to fight or die like rats in a trap. They chose to fight and they played their sixes well. At such close quarters, and in the hands of such men, a total miss was almost impossible, and they opened many a bloody tunnel before they were beaten down by the force of numbers.

Then Lodestone Dave pushed to the front.

"Ha! who triumphs now, Blizzard Ben?" he sneeringly asked.

"Set down in front!" answered the Thunderer, with his unwavering courage. "Get ter one side, Dave Connors, or I'll breathe hard from my lower chest, an' send you up like er balloon. I'm Blizzard Ben, ther Arizona whirlwind, an' I'm talkin'. You hear me?"

"You'll soon be swingin' on nothin'," said Connors, viciously. "I've hated you ever sence we bucked ag'in' each other in Leadville, an' now my day o' triumph is come. I won't delay this time. Blackfoot Sam, yonder rope is long enough fur two. Will you swing these cusses up?"

"Up she goes, a-flukin'," the ruffian promptly answered.

And then rough hands dragged Ben and Earl under the branch, the ropes were noosed about their necks, and Blackfoot Sam raised his hand to give the signal which should launch them into eternity.

The overseer had left Lemuel Cole in bed, but the ex-boss was restless and uneasy; so he finally arose and went to the window. He did not feel nearly so weak as he had expected, and as he looked out he became filled with a desire to do something to annoy and injure his enemies.

His mind wandered to Lillian Danton. After the fashion of his villainous heart he had taken quite a fancy to the girl, and the more he thought the more he wished to possess her.

Life seemed destined to be rather unpleasant for him in Keno after that. Beaten at every point, despised by honest men and hated by those who had followed Moses Chick, he had only the meager following of his own mine-employees, and the fall from power cut him like a knife.

Reflection gave him an idea very unlike his usual cool self. He determined to abduct Lillian and flee from the city to some more congenial place. He had men who would do his bidding, and when the affair had blown over a little, an agent could be sent to dispose of the Lodestone mine.

In thus calculating, Cole knew he had taken hold of a heavy load, but he was not the first man who has been made mad by a woman's face.

While at the window he heard firing at the further side of the village, and knew that bullets were again trumps. Whatever had caused the demonstration, it would make a diversion—why couldn't he improve the chance to snare his game?

He went down to the bar-room, excitement giving him strength, and soon had half-a-dozen of his employes under his wing.

They went out together, talked seriously, and in the end went to the Danton cabin.

A light turned in the kitchen, and he applied his eyes to the window. Mrs. Danton and Lillian were there, but no one else was visible. Doubtless their protectors had been drawn away by the firing, which, just then, had increased to a hail-storm.

Bidding one man follow him, he unceremoniously entered the house. The ladies seemed startled to see him, but he waved his hand blandly.

"Be not alarmed," he said, "for I am here as a friend. Do you hear the firing?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Danton. "What is the cause?"

"The Apache Indians have attacked the town, and matters look squarely for us. In this crisis, all white men have put their hands together as one, and the city must be saved. The red fiends shall not pillage our homes. Our leaders, however, have decided that all non-combatants had better go to the Pilgrim's Rest, and we are here to conduct you to that place."

"Who sent you?" Lillian asked.

"Blizzard Ben and Arnold."

"We thank them, but we will remain here."

"You won't go?" Cole said, in seeming amazement.

"No, sir."

"Think of the Apaches."

"I think of them as men who are probably a hundred miles away. Mr. Cole, your scheme will not work. We know you and your ways. We will not go with you."

"By the fiends, you shall go, willingly or otherwise. Here, Abe, seize the girl while I keep off the old woman."

"Hould yer hand, me bould b'ye," said a voice in the rear, and the pair of villains turned to see Mike Mulloy between them and the door, a six-shooter in each hand and the muzzles covering their breasts.

The boy handled the irons like one well up in the business, and his freckled face bore a good-humored smile.

"Be aisy, darlant," he added, as Cole stared in silence. "It's mesilf that houlds ther dhrop, an' if vez meddle with yer sixes, off goes your heads. Your hands seem uneasy; hould dhem up!"

"Curse you, what do you mean?" snarled Cole.

"Hands up, I say, an' ef I have ter repate dher order, out yez go on strikes."

There was a menace in the young fellow's voice which could not be defied, and Cole took warning from the glimmer behind his smile.

"I'll obey, to avoid trouble," he said; "but I protest against such an indignity. What do you mean, anyway?"

"I mane dhat your race is about rin, me gav ould man. Whin a graybeard goes ter foolin' around a young girl he generally gets saft in dher upper sthory, but you have been dher prince av fools. So yez would take dher ladies away, whether or no? I say yez can't, an' I'm hyer ter prove it. It's mesilf dhat's thinkin' dher Vigilantes will rin yez out av town afore another night."

"Curse you, what do you mean? I will—"

"No, yez won't, Lem Cole. Kape your hands well up, or it's lead I'll be a-chuckin'."

Mike paused somewhat abruptly, and all in the cabin listened intently. For several minutes the firing outside had been increasing in briskness, and now, unless all signs were unreliable, the warriors were nearing the cabin.

Shots and yells sounded near at hand, and then came two or three dull *chugs*, as of bullets striking the outer walls.

"Ther devil is ter pay," said Abe.

"Is it another riot, young man?" Cole asked of Mike.

"Devil a bit do I know av dher cause, but I opine we will soon be enlightened. Meanwhile, kape your hands above your heads, an' don't thry any foolin' while Mike Mulloy is around."

CHAPTER XX.

WINNERS AND SPOILS.

WHEN Blizzard Ben and Earl Chester found their necks so securely in the hempen neckties, it looked as though they were checked straight through for the other end of the route, surrounded as they were by twenty roughs; but just as the ropes began to tighten there sounded a faint cheer, and several horsemen dashed into the crowd of exiles and began shooting right and left.

Earl saw that all of the new-comers were masked, and it needed no second person to tell him they were men of Captain Bison's band.

They rode recklessly about, shooting whenever an enemy could be seen, and in a very short time the toughs from Bumblebee were reduced to a fraction.

One man, however, soon found his way to the men in the halters, and as their bonds fell off before the touch of his knife, Earl recognized Bison himself.

"Couldn't keep away from the cravat *soiree*, any how," said the robber. "These Bumblebees are about played, I reckon, but the hunters are themselves hunted."

"What do you mean?"

"The Vigilantes have driven me and my mountain braves out of our paradise and we are seeking pastures nev'. The road through David Pass has been well-traveled this night. First came you, then the exiles from Bumblebee, then my gallant band, and in our rear the Vigilantes are on the hoof. We run, but we are not so very much afraid. We will now bid you good-by. We are going through Keno, but not a man, woman or Chinaman will we harm if left alone. Good-night. Mountain braves, march!"

The wild band moved off, but they had not faded from view in the darkness when another troop of horsemen came into sight, sweeping along their trail.

The Vigilantes had come to town.

Ben and Earl remained unseen, but in a minute more a desultory firing proved that the two bands were fighting among the cabins and the younger man spoke the thoughts of both.

"Hadn't we better go to the aid of the Dantons?"

"Durned ef we hadn't," said the Thunderer. "That may be bad weather thar, an' a pair o' human cyclones won't come amiss."

They soon reached the cabin, passing through fighting men, for the road-agents had turned at bay among the houses, but no one was very near the Danton home.

The ruffians left outside by Cole had vamosed. Blizzard Ben opened the door and they entered to see Cole and his man, Abe, held off by Mike Mulloy's revolver.

"Arrah, me darlants," the Irishman said, "an' what dher devil is dher racket outside?"

"The Vigilantes and Bison's men are fighting," answered Earl, looking inquiringly at Cole.

"Let them fight. Blizzard Ben, take a rope an' bind dthese two spalpeens."

The men stormed in vain; in a short time they were rendered perfectly helpless.

"Lem Cole," Mike then said, "ye hev played a game an' lost, but yez would niver have fingered Lee Danton's pile ef yez had married dher fair Lillian. I'll show yer why."

He went to one side and applied some acid to his face afterward applying water liberally. Then he cast off a red wig and turned around looking very unlike Mike Mulloy.

"Lee Danton!" cried the ex-boss, in amazement.

"Very true. You plainly see now that I was not shot by the Apaches. Instead, I was taken prisoner and held for a season. When I escaped, I conceived the idea of coming here in disguise. I shaved off my beard, donned a wig, colored and freckled my face, and when I came no one except Blizzard Ben, my mother and sister knew me. They had seen me the Irishman before, and I did not try to deceive them."

Just then the door opened and Buck Arnold entered. His face lightened at sight of Earl.

"You are wanted outside by friends," he said, mopping his wet forehead. "I never seen such times sence I tramped with John C. Fremont."

Earl went out and saw Bison and Maggie, surrounded by two-score of their men.

"We are going away for good," said the robber. "We have beat off the Vigilantes temporarily, but they are forming at the other end of the village, and we must get. Once for all, and in a friendly way, will you be a lieutenant in my band?"

Maggie rode forward and laid her hand on his arm.

"Will you come?" she softly asked.

"My good friends," said Earl, with some emotion, "I thank you from the bottom of my heart, but your ways are not mine. I must decline, but I hope we may always be friends. I know you are far better than I once thought, and my best wishes are yours."

"That's all I expected. We will part friends. I see you have Lem Cole insile. I want him."

"No, no—" began Arnold; but Bison answered by a word to his men.

Buck and Earl were thrown aside, the cabin was invaded, and, despite Cole's cries, he was taken away. There was a hoarse cheer from the mountain braves and then they were gone.

The following morning dawned clear and pleasant and all was well in Keno Camp. Bison's men were gone and the Vigilantes were gone on their trail, but the bold robbers had easily escaped—gone to find a new field of operations.

The bullet hailstorm had left signs behind—dead men, cabins scarred with marks of balls; and on a tree outside the village Lemuel Cole and Dave Conors were found dangling from lassoes. They had paid the debt.

Of Dunn, the red-nosed man, we have no further record.

Keno Camp had been purified by suffering, and under the wise rule of Buck Arnold the "city" waxed prosperous and law-abiding. The mayor still talks of the old days with John C. Fremont.

An heir to Cole's wealth was found in an Eastern village, and the money went to one who was deserving.

It soon came to pass that Earl Chester married Lillian, and, to-day, he and Lee Danton run the mine together.

Blizzard Ben left Keno accompanied by Shirley. Both were rovers by nature and practice, and they went to seek new fields of adventure.

THE END.

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